Developmental and Symptom Specificity of Hopelessness, Cognitive Errors, and Attributional Bias Among Clinic-Referred Youth

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ABSTRACT: The present study examined the unique and interactive relationships between age and indices of psychopathology (i.e., anxiety, aggression, and depression), with three types of maladaptive cognitions: hopelessness, negative cognitive errors, and attributional bias. Some negative cognitions were not unique to depression and were associated with broader psychopathology. Developmental considerations also influenced some negative cognitions or qualified the association between negative cognitions and depression.

KEY WORDS: Childhood Depression; Cognitions; Development.

This study will examine whether developmental considerations influence the relationship between depression and three classes of negative cognitions (i.e. hopelessness, attributions, and negative cognitive errors). Depressed adults display a range of negative cognitions, however, it is not clear whether negative cognitions play a causal role in child depression. Some studies have found that depression in childhood is directly related to hopelessness, attributional style, and cognitive distortions. Few studies could support a unique association between these cognitions and depression, suggesting that some cognitions are not specific to depression. For example, it is unclear whether depres-
sive or anxiety symptoms relate to a unique set of cognitive processes in young people. Some would posit that negative cognitions are not specific to depression but reflective of general affectivity. Others have proposed that different types of cognitions are related to anxiety while others are specific to depression.

If such cognitive events are causal, we would expect to observe developmental pathways wherein negative cognitions are displayed by depressed children and adolescents. While some research has shown that depressed children and adolescents self-report the same kinds of negative cognitions as adults, support for the continuity of negative cognitions across the developmental spectrum has not been uniform. Developmental changes that affect cognitive dimensions such as egocentricity, sense of self, concrete versus abstract thinking, or attributions of causality may play a role in determining the kinds of negative cognitions displayed by depressed children at different ages. For example, negative perceptions of the future are central to feelings of hopelessness. It is unclear, however, whether the relationship between depression and hopelessness is influenced by developmental variation in a child's conception of the future. A young child's over reliance on concrete operations may lead to a less complex view of the future. Therefore, a younger child's expectations concerning future outcomes may be seen as an extension of current circumstances.

Young children also have a more permeable and less differentiated self-concept; consequently, disturbances in affect may be a direct reflection of concurrent negative events. As a result, environmental stressors may be more central to depression early in development, with negative cognitions playing a more prominent role later in development.

Causal models of depression in adults would maintain that a set of stable negative cognitions (i.e. attributions or cognitive errors) are integral to depression and can serve to distort adverse reality in a maladaptive manner. However, recent evidence would indicate that these cognitions may be influenced by developmental considerations and would suggest that negative cognitions play a more critical role in depression only at later stages in development. For example, some studies have noted that prior to middle childhood, young people have a relatively unstable attributional style and are inconsistent in attributing failure to either effort or ability. Only after middle childhood are young people likely to reliably take personal responsibility for negative outcomes and to consistently relate negative events to