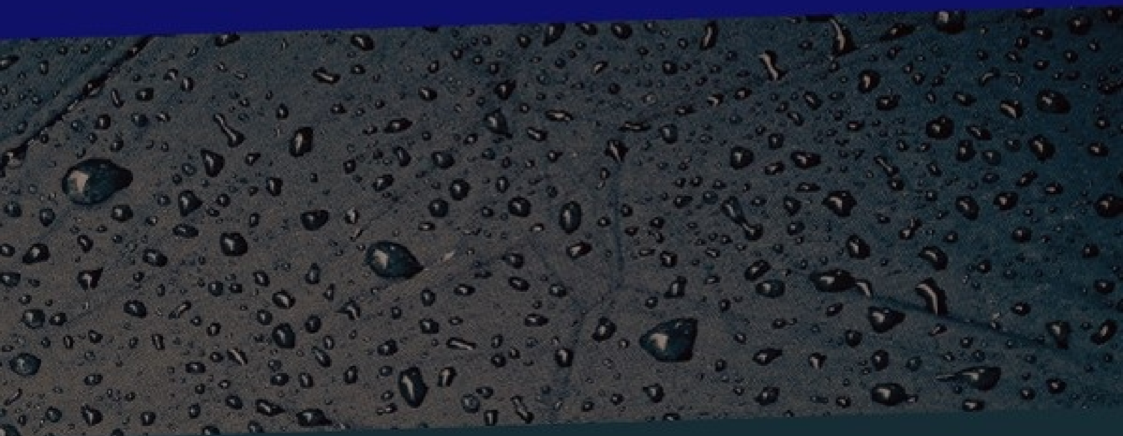
Interpersonal and Social Approaches



James C. Coyne

Essential Papers on Depression

INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL APPROACHES

Part III

James C. Coyne

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INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL APPROACHES

The articles in this section are diverse, but they share an assumption that depression must be understood in its social context. The article by Coyne is concerned with the interpersonal dynamics in the close relationships of depressed persons and is more clinical in nature than the other articles of the section. The article by Billings and Moos deals with the social environment in terms of stress and coping processes and social support. Both Brown and Becker are sociologists, and in different ways each set about to do what C. Wright Mills (1959) has identified as the proper task of social science: to demonstrate the connection of "personal troubles" to the social

structure. Our consideration of interpersonal and social approaches to depression would be incomplete without some acknowledgment of the greater risk for depression that Western industrialized society has for women, and Radloff explores this issue in the final article of the section.

The article by Coyne builds upon earlier work by Mabel Cohen and her colleagues. Its point of departure is a greater focus on the contemporary relationships of adult depressed persons, with a conceptualization of depression as an emergent interpersonal system of depressive behavior and the response of others. According to this model, the symptoms of depression are powerful in their ability to arouse guilt in others and to inhibit the direct expression of annoyance and hostility from them. Initially, the depressed persons' distress engages others and shifts the interactional burden

onto them. Yet the persistence of the depressed persons' distress may soon prove incomprehensible and aversive to them. Members of the social environment attempt to control this aversiveness and alleviate their guilt by manipulating depressed persons with nongenuine reassurance and support. At the same time, these persons may come to reject and avoid the depressives. As these feelings become apparent, the depressed persons are confirmed in their suspicions that they are not accepted or valued by others, and that future interactions cannot be assured. In an attempt to maintain themselves in this increasingly insecure situation, the depressed persons may display more distress, thereby strengthening this interpersonal pattern.

Coyne's model suggests that depressed persons' self-complaints are not merely a matter of cognitive distortion, as they are construed by

the cognitive models, but rather that they reflect in part the confusing but negative reactions that they are receiving from others. Like other people, depressed people form expectations and interpret ambiguous situations in terms of frequent and salient recent experiences, and their negative social involvements may provide a background for interpreting new experiences. Furthermore, voicing their self-complaints may become a way of avoiding or inhibiting negative responses from others, even if the long-term effect of such a strategy is rejection.

Laboratory studies have found that in a short interaction, depressed persons induce negative affect in others and get rejected (Coyne, 1976; Gurtman, in press; Strack & Coyne, 1983). In just three minutes, there are identifiable changes in the nonverbal behavior of persons talking to someone who is depressed (Gotlib & Robinson,

1982), and in a debriefing, subjects admit to being less honest with a depressed partner (Strack & Coyne, 1983). Coyne (1976) proposed that the negative mood that depressed persons induce in others has the effect of making any positive behavior they display less rewarding. It is not just that depressed persons lack social skills, as Lewinsohn suggested, but that they lack the *special* skills required by their situations.

Recent work derived from this model has centered on the marital and family relationships of depressed persons (Coyne, Kahn, & Gotlib, 1986). In marital interaction, the inhibited and inhibiting quality of depressed behavior is seen in terms of a self-perpetuating pattern of (1) avoidance of conflict in a way that allows unresolved issues to accumulate, (2) negative exchanges with no problem resolution, and (3) withdrawal into inhibition and conflict avoidance again (Kahn,

Coyne, & Margolin, in press). Both laboratory and home observations of depressed persons reveal that they face more hostility from family members than do nondepressed persons, but that their display of symptoms may indeed inhibit expression of these negative feelings (Biglan, et al., in press; Hops, et al., 1984). Therapeutic applications of this model are seen in the refinement of a brief strategic martial therapy for depressed persons (Coyne, 1983), but systematic outcome studies have not yet been conducted. Overall, the model is newer than the cognitive and behavioral formulations of depression, and it has not yet been subject to the critical scrutiny that these models have.

Billings and Moos summarize recent developments in the conceptualization of depression in terms of stress and coping process. A considerable body of research has documented

the relationship between major life events and the onset of depression. (For a review, see Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974.) In particular, events involving interpersonal losses have been shown to result in depression, but the association between negative life events and depression have been weaker than originally anticipated. This has led theorists and researchers to consider broader definitions of stress, as well as the personal and environmental resources and coping that might mediate the stress-depression connection.

As noted by Billings and Moos, stressful life circumstances leading to depression may include not only major life events, but chronic life strains such as financial problems and poor working conditions, and the accumulation of microstressors or daily hassles. Personal resources may make the difference as to whether such stress occurs or actually results in

depression. Under this rubric, Billings and Moos include cognitive factors such as a sense of mastery or control and attributional style, as well as interpersonal orientation.

Social support is perhaps the most critical environmental resource, and its possible stress-buffering role has received considerable attention. Work by Brown (see below) has singled out the availability of a close confiding relationship as an important protection against depression. However, Billings and Moos note that close relationships are also one of the most important sources of stress, and that in particular, marital conflict and disruption frequently result in depression.

Personal and environmental resources shape how a person appraises and copes with stress. Appraisal refers to the person's continually

reevaluated judgments about the demands and constraints in ongoing transactions with the environment and the options for meeting them (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980). Appraisal processes determine coping, consistent with the person’s agenda. Billings and Moos note that three sub-domains of coping are generally recognized: efforts to define or redefine the personal significance of a situation, efforts to deal with the source of stress, and efforts to reduce or manage one’s distress. Billings and Moos raise the interesting issue of whether support-seeking is an effective form of coping with stress. Consistent with the results of a number of studies Coyne, Aldwin, & Lazarus, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), they suggest that support-seeking may have a detrimental effect upon relationships, particularly in the face of chronic stressors. Apparently, support-seeking is an ineffective form

of coping, and those who actively seek support are not those who receive it.

The model presented by Billings and Moos is less of a theoretical formulation than a heuristic device for organizing some of the findings emerging from a growing number of recent studies of the stress, support, and coping processes associated with depression. They are careful to emphasize that the model is a simplification as it is presented, and that many of the unicausal pathways that they identify are best seen as aspects of more complex, mutually causative relationships. The Moos group has noted this in its own empirical work. For instance, Mitchell, Cronkite, and Moos (1983) proposed that stress faced by members of a social network has both a direct effect on individual levels of depression and an indirect effect by way of a reduction in the support available.

Brown (this volume) attempts to explain social class differences in depression among women in terms of more proximal psychosocial variables. In developing and testing his model with six samples of depressed women, he also succeeds in providing a precise empirical statement about the relationship of stress and support to depression.

He employed an intensive interview to discover the characteristics of life events most related to depression. Not all major life events increase the risk for depression, only the most severe and typically those involving loss. These severe events were designated *provoking agents.* A second class of provoking agents, ongoing life difficulties, also proved important, but less potent.

The presence of a provoking agent was related to class background and to depression, but it did little to explain class differences in depression.

Brown then set out to identify a set of factors leading to a vulnerability to provoking agents. By far, the most important *vulnerability factor* was the lack of an intimate, confiding relationship with a husband or boyfriend. Other significant, but less important vulnerability factors were the presence of three or more children in the home under age 14, being unemployed, and having lost a mother in childhood. The greater likelihood of working-class women becoming depressed was more related to their having one or more these vulnerability agents than it was to their greater risk of experiencing a provoking agent. In the article, Brown develops this model further and also distinguishes a third class of factors influencing the formation of symptoms (see also Brown & Harris, 1978, for an extended discussion).

Brown's work is proving highly influential in terms of his method for exploring the contextual

determinants of the stress-depression relationship, as well as the specific findings he obtained. In particular, his findings about the importance of the absence of a single confiding relationship with an intimate and of having extensive childrearing responsibilities as vulnerability factors sparked considerable interest in the social determinants of depression. Brown's model is more limited than the heuristic one presented by Billings and Moos, but within those limits, it is developed more precisely. Yet unlike Billings and Moos, Brown's model lacks any consideration of coping. Brown and Harris (1978) have acknowledged this as setting the agenda for future work:

> Future research will need to focus on the role of the immediate social context, on individuals and their households, and on how they get caught up in a crisis or difficulty, try to cope with it, and the resources they have for this. But at the same

> time the possibility of spelling out broader links must be pursued. ...Both individual-oriented and society-oriented studies are required.... It is too easy for the broader approach to ignore the complexities of the individual's immediate social milieu and for the more detailed approach to get lost in the intricacies of the individual personality (p. 293).

Ernest Becker's work on depression has thus far received more attention in Europe than in the United States (Freden, 1982). The lively, irreverent style of the Becker article contrasts sharply with the scholarly tone of other articles in this volume. His presentation of the psychodynamic perspective borders on satire. Yet, we should not let this distract us from the serious points that he makes.

Becker draws on Szasz (1961) in suggesting that depression is more properly seen as a loss of a "game" rather than the mere loss of an object,

with game referring to the norms or rules that structure one's life and give it meaning. In light of this, the puzzling self-accusations of depressed persons are seen as an effort to claim a meaning or identity or a meaning when these have been lost or damaged. "The individual gropes for a language with which to supply a meaning to his life-plot when all other props for meaning are pulled away." Being depressed is the game that one plays when one is frustrated in attempts to play another meaningful game.

Despite his diatribe against psychodynamic formulations of depression, Becker accepts and builds upon Bibring's suggestion that depression is a result of a threat to self-esteem. Yet, for Becker, self-esteem is a matter of social symbols and social motives even more than it was for Bibring. It is not just an inner experience, it is a social construction, and depends upon what

society and culture provide. “Nothing less than a full sweep of culture activity is brought into consideration in the single case of depression.”

The risk for depression lies in having too limited a range of games to play. Like Brown, Becker raises the possibility that culture creates the opportunity for depression. A culture may provide only a narrow range of objects and games. In the case of Western industrialized society, women are given access to a “limited range of monopolizing interpersonal experiences.” Becker’s intent and style are quite different than Brown’s, but reading the two articles together one gets a sense of a rich and creative way of making sense of Brown’s findings concerning the determinants of depression among working class women.

Radloff examines some possible reasons for persistent findings that in both community

surveys and clinical samples, women are 1.6 to 2 times more likely to be depressed than are men (Boyd & Weissman, 1981; Weissman & Klerman, 1977). These sex differences do not appear to be due to women's greater tendencies to acknowledge, report, or seek help for depressive symptoms. The main exceptions to these generally consistent findings of a sex difference in depression come from studies conducted in developing countries or Finland and Norway or with the American Amish.

The Radloff goes beyond simple efforts to demonstrate a sex difference in depression and uses data from two epidemiological surveys to explore the social conditions in which this difference does or does not occur. Marriage proves to be an important factor. In Radloff's combined sample, women are more depressed than are men, but this is true only among the married, divorced,

separated, and never-married heads who are not heads of households. Women who have never married but are heads of households are not only less depressed than married women, they are even less depressed than their male counterparts.

Radloff examines a number of demographic variables that might provide alternative explanations for her results, but her basic conclusions are sustained. These results could have profound social implications in the way that they implicate the institution of marriage. Other studies are also finding an interaction between sex and marriage in rates of depression, but the general suggestion seems to be that it is not that marriage makes women more depressed but rather that it confers less benefits on women than on men (Kessler & McRae, 1984). One provocative study found that women were more depressed than men only when children were present in the

home, but that the major portion of this sex difference was due to men benefiting from being married *and* having children in the home, relative to both other men and women, rather than to women being placed more at risk by these factors (Aneshensel, Frerichs, & Clark, 1981). The debate continues, and it is likely that a host of additional variables will have to be considered to fully explain the social determinants of sex differences in depression. Yet, as Radloff notes, the findings thus far clearly indicate that this sex difference cannot be reduced to a matter of biological vulnerability.

The Radloff article is an excellent example of the uses to which such epidemiological data can be put. Such an approach represents a different level of analysis than the more psychological perspectives that we have been considering, but in principle, at least, the two should be compatible

and even complementary. Indeed, valid results from both approaches should converge in suggesting how features of the social structure might make more likely the psychological conditions associated with depression. Yet, survey studies are typically conducted by epidemiologists and sociologists who give little heed to developments in psychiatry and psychology. The Radloff article is unusual in attempting an integration. Having identified some social factors associated with depression, Radloff goes on to speculate about what psychological factors might intervene between social factors and depression. Creative use is made of the theoretical and research literature concerning both learned helplessness and sex role stereotypes.

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