Predicting Depression Using Earliest Childhood Memories

Marvin W. Acklin  
The Queen's Medical Center  
Honolulu, Hawaii

Ann Sauer, Gene Alexander, and Bernard Dugoni  
Loyola University of Chicago

In order to investigate the utility of earliest childhood memories (EMs) in clinical assessment, this study investigated the value of EMs in predicting naturally occurring depressive mood states. Of interest were those features of EMs that discriminate depressed from nondepressed individuals. Subjects were 212 undergraduate volunteers who completed the Beck Depression Inventory, the Profile of Mood States, and a self-administered EM questionnaire. Utilizing thematic predictors derived from cognitive and psychodynamic theories of depression, depressed subjects were differentiated from nondepressed subjects at a rate significantly greater than chance, \( p < .001 \), with a highly respectable estimate of cross-validation shrinkage. The findings demonstrate the phenomenon of mood dependent recall in autobiographical memory, namely, that memory attributes are strongly influenced by current mood state. Consistent with psychodynamic theories of depression and in contrast to cognitive theory, depressive mood states appear to facilitate retrieval of memory schemas involving deprivation and disturbing human interaction. Schemas involving loss of control, failure, or reactions to noncontingent reinforcement (perceptions of the self as agent) appear less salient than relationship schemas (perceptions of the self as related) in depressive experience.

A small, but steadily growing body of research documents the clinical value of earliest childhood memories (EMs). Although some investigations of EMs have focused on their theoretical and psychotherapeutic significance (e.g., Adler, 1931; Binder & Smokler, 1980; Brubh & Last, 1982; Freud, 1899/1995; Mayman, 1968; Mosak, 1958), a number of empirical studies have recently