An fMRI Study of Emotional Face Processing in Adolescent Major Depression

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE: Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a serious, often chronic illness associated with significant impairment and suicide. MDD often begins during adolescence when brain areas that regulate emotion processing are still maturing. To expand upon our limited understanding of the neurobiological underpinnings of MDD early on in development, this study examined function within fronto-limbic neural circuits in response to an emotional faces task among depressed adolescents and healthy controls (HC) using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). METHOD: 34 adolescents with MDD (12 medicated, 22 unmedicated) and 16 healthy age and gender matched controls completed an emotional faces task where BOLD response was examined when viewing happy and fearful faces (presented in a block design) during fMRI. Scanning was completed using a 3.0 Tesla scanner. Data preprocessing and analysis was carried out using FEAT in FSL. Whole brain group level analyses were conducted using a mixed-effects model (FLAME) with cluster-wise significant testing (min Z=2.32; cluster significance = p<0.05, corrected). RESULTS: In response to viewing fearful versus happy faces, MDD showed reduced activation in areas of the right thalamus, right insula, and right hippocampus compared to HC. CONCLUSION: Results suggest that emotion processing in adolescent MDD is associated with abnormalities in subcortical and paralimbic brain regions within the broader fronto-limbic neural network. It is possible that these findings reflect deficits in depressed adolescents’ ability to elicit cognitive control from higher cortical regions and to accurately respond to and process the emotional significance of fearful stimuli.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. i
Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. iii
List of Tables ......................................................................................................................... iv
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... v

I. Emotion Processing Deficits in MDD: Evidence from Behavioral Research .................. 3
II. Fronto-Limbic Neural Circuitry .......................................................................................... 6
III. Alterations in Emotional Face Processing: Adult MDD .................................................. 8
IV. Alterations in Emotional Face Processing: Adolescent MDD ......................................... 10
V. Effects of Co-morbid Anxiety and Antidepressants .......................................................... 11
VI. Method .............................................................................................................................. 13
   A. Participants ...................................................................................................................... 13
   B. Measures ....................................................................................................................... 14
      a. Psychiatric and Intellectual Assessments ................................................................. 14
      b. Behavioral Paradigm (Emotional Faces Task) ........................................................... 15
   C. Image acquisition ......................................................................................................... 15
   D. Procedure ...................................................................................................................... 16
   E. Statistical Analysis ....................................................................................................... 17
      a. Demographics and Clinical Data ........................................................................... 17
      b. Functional Data ....................................................................................................... 17

VII. Results .............................................................................................................................. 18
   A. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics ................................................................... 18
   B. Imaging Results .......................................................................................................... 19
      a. HC and Full MDD: Individual Analyses ................................................................. 19
      b. HC and Full MDD: Group Analyses .................................................................... 20
      c. HC and Medicated MDD: Group Analyses ............................................................ 21
      d. HC and Unmedicated MDD: Group Analyses ....................................................... 21
      e. MDD and Co-morbid Anxiety: Group Analyses .................................................... 21
      f. BOLD Response and Depression Severity ............................................................... 22

VIII. Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 22
References ............................................................................................................................... 30
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic and clinical data for the full sample. 44

Table 2. Anatomical location and z-score associated with peak activation of significant clusters observed between HC and the full MDD sample. 45
List of Figures

Figure 1. Significant clusters between unmedicated depressed participants compared to healthy controls in response to fearful faces................................. 46

Figure 2. Scatterplot between blood-oxygen-level-dependent (BOLD) percent signal change and depression severity score (group-centered BDI) in a subsample of the unmedicated MDD group..............................................................47
Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a serious mental illness characterized by a heterogeneous presentation of symptoms that include depressed mood and anhedonia in addition to fatigue; sleep, appetite, and motor disturbances; cognitive alterations; feelings of worthlessness; and thoughts of suicide (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). MDD is a common psychiatric disorder with lifetime prevalence rates estimated between approximately 15% and 20% (Birmaher, Arbelaez, & Brent, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 2010; Nes et al., 2013). On average, disease onset occurs during early adulthood (Kessler et al., 2010). However, MDD often develops during adolescence (Birmaher et al., 2002; Kessler, Avenevoli, & Ries Merikangas, 2001) where it frequently follows a chronic course and places youth at risk for significant morbidity and mortality across the lifespan (Berndt et al., 2000; Zisook et al., 2007). According to the National Comorbidity Survey, Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A), 11% of adolescents will experience a depressive episode before 18 years of age and 3.3% of adolescents will experience an episode classified as severe (Merikangas et al., 2011). Of those who develop MDD, most will experience recurrent episodes (Hirschfeld, 2012; Keller et al., 1992). According to Kessler, Birnbaum, Bromet, Hwang, Sampson and Shahly (2010), individuals with MDD report an average of 18.6 major depressive episodes during their lifetimes that typically last approximately 4-7 months (Kessler et al., 2003; Kessler et al., 2010).

The World Health Organization listed MDD as a leading cause of disability among adolescents and adults (World Health Organization, 2008). MDD has been linked to major role impairments (Kessler et al., 2003), significant use of health care resources (Kessler et al., 2010), high treatment costs (Kessler, 2012), reduced life satisfaction (Nes
et al., 2013) and high rates of mortality, including death by suicide (Simon & Hales, 2006). Thus, negative outcomes associated with MDD affect all aspects of life: personal, social, occupational, and may result in chronic suffering and early death.

Vulnerability for MDD has been attributed to both environmental (e.g., stressful life events) and genetic factors (Lewinsohn, Allen, Seeley, & Gotlib, 1999; Lopez-Leon et al., 2008; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999; Widom, DuMont, & Czaja, 2007). Regardless of its origins, significant evidence from neuroscience research indicates that aspects of depressive symptomology are mediated by abnormalities in underlying neurobiological structure and function (Mayberg, 1997; Tanti & Belzung, 2010a). Of particular importance to this study, abnormal processing of emotional stimuli, which is regulated by fronto-limbic brain circuits, has been consistently implicated in the context of major depression and is thought to increase risk of disease development, maintenance and relapse (Foland-Ross & Gotlib, 2012a; Mathews & MacLeod, 2005).

Given the individual and societal burdens that result from this psychiatric illness, research that further advances our understanding of the etiological and maintaining factors contributing to MDD is critically important. In particular, examining neurobiological underpinnings of emotion processing abnormalities in adolescent MDD is necessary for several reasons. First, the prognosis for depression is particularly poor when the problems are evident early on during development (Brent et al., 1998; Gollan, Raffety, Gortner, & Dobson, 2005; Zisook et al., 2007). For example, early onset depression is associated with increased symptom severity, greater likelihood of relapse, and increased suicidality (Hollon et al., 2006). In addition, neural pruning occurs throughout adolescence and growing evidence suggests that fronto-limbic brain circuits...
controlling emotion processing continue to undergo significant maturation and refinement during this time (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006; Romeo & McEwen, 2006). Examining biological mechanisms of emotion regulation early in the disease course, uncompromised by the scarring effects of chronic illness, may help us identify neurobiological markers unique to adolescent MDD. Doing so has the potential to improve our understanding of treatment targets and thus lead to the development of innovative early intervention strategies that take advantage of still-malleable neural systems prior to maturity.

This paper provides background regarding what is known about emotional processing deficits and the neural circuits underlying them in MDD. It then presents a study investigating brain function in response to an emotional processing task in depressed adolescents.

**Emotion Processing Deficits in MDD: Evidence from Behavioral Research**

There is significant evidence from non-neurobiological research that suggests individuals with MDD possess biases towards processing negative over more positively valenced emotional stimuli. Specifically, those with MDD exhibit alterations in attention towards negative cues in addition to abnormalities in memory and interpretation of emotional information. The studies presented below briefly illustrate some the cognitive biases, present at both basic (Suslow et al., 2010) and higher levels of cognitive processing (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005), that have been indentified using behavioral measures.

Tasks that examine unconscious processing of emotional cues (e.g., dot-probe task, Emotional Stroop task, lexical decision task) have tended to suggest that major
depression is not associated with automatic biases in attention towards negative emotions (B. P. Bradley, Mogg, Millar, & White, 1995; Lim & Kim, 2005; Mathews, Ridgeway, & Williamson, 1996; Mogg, Bradley, & Williams, 1995) although recent neuroimaging studies suggest otherwise (Victor, Furey, Fromm, Ohman, & Drevets, 2010). Regardless, individuals with depression do appear to possess altered attention towards negative information presented at the conscious level, so termed mood-congruent attention bias. For example, Gotlib et al. (2004) examined processing of positive and negative facial stimuli in clinically diagnosed depression and social phobia using a facial expression dot-probe task. During this task, participants were shown pictures of emotional faces (sad, happy, angry, neutral) side by side on a computer screen and subsequently asked to identify the location of a dot presented in the same location as one of the previously viewed images. Quicker response times to dots presented in the same location as negative emotional faces reflected biased attention towards negative stimuli. Using this method, Gotlib et al. (2004) found that, compared to anxious and healthy controls, depressed participants were significantly faster at locating the probes presented in the same location as sad faces than they were for the happy or angry faces. This same pattern of results has been replicated in other studies employing verbal stimuli as well (Bradley, Mogg, & Lee, 1997; Fritzsche et al., 2010).

In addition to findings observed during acute phases of the illness, attention biases towards sad stimuli have been found in individuals who have recovered from the illness (Fritzsche et al., 2010; Joormann, Siemer, & Gotlib, 2007) and in individuals who possess a family history of depression (Joormann, Talbot, & Gotlib, 2007; Kujawa et al., 2011), indicating that biases towards negative stimuli may place individuals at increased
risk for MDD development (Koster et al., 2006). Similarly, depressed individuals have been found to spend more time selectively attending to stimuli with negative themes than controls when studied using eye-track paradigms (Caseras, Garner, Bradley, & Mogg, 2007; Eizenman et al., 2003), implying that sustained attention biases may also function to maintain depressive symptoms (Bradley et al., 1997).

Individuals with MDD appear to possess biases in both implicit and explicit memory for emotionally-laden information (Bradley et al., 1995; Gilboa-Schechtman, Erhard-Weiss, & Jeczemien, 2002; Watkins, Martin, & Stern, 2000). For example, using self-referential encoding and recall tasks, recovered and acutely ill individuals with MDD have been shown to recall a higher proportion of sad words and a lower proportion of positive words than anxious or healthy controls (Fritzsche et al., 2010; Gotlib et al., 2004). By measuring self-perceptions and response latencies in addition to recall, this method ensures that memory biases are not confounded by differences in individual endorsement or overall memory performance.

Lastly, consistent with cognitive theories of MDD, depressed individuals tend to both prospectively (Lawson, MacLeod, & Hammond, 2002) and retrospectively (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005) interpret events as being more negative than controls. This is illustrated by Lawson et al. (2002) who found that higher depression severity scores were associated with greater eye-blink magnitudes in response to ambiguous cues. The magnitude of the eye-blink reflex is a well-validated measure of emotional valence, where more negative stimuli evoke larger eye-blink responses (Bradley, Cuthbert, & Lang, 1991; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1990).
Taken together, findings from the studies highlighted above indicate that MDD is associated with biases in regards to attention, memory, and interpretation of negative stimuli, which likely influence emotional pathology in a causal manner (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005). It has been suggested that these biases result from alterations in both bottom-up emotional and top-down control neural processes (Foland-Ross & Gotlib, 2012b), functions which are regulated by fronto-limbic brain circuits.

**Fronto-Limbic Neural Circuitry**

The fronto-limbic neural network, as proposed by Mayberg (1997, 2003) in her dysregulation model of depression, is composed of neocortical, subcortical and paralimbic brain structures that interact to regulate emotional reactivity and affective behavior. Specifically, neocortical structures include the dorsal-lateral prefrontal cortex, inferior parietal cortex, and dorsal and posterior cingulate cortex. These higher order cortical regions play a regulatory role in emotion processing and are thought to be associated with the cognitive and attentional abnormalities observed in MDD (Halari et al., 2009).

Paralimbic structures include the medial orbital frontal cortex, subgenual cingulate cortex, hypothalamus, hippocampus, insular cortex, and amygdala. These more primitive limbic structures form the foundation of our emotional system, where they are responsible for responding to emotional cues. In particular, the amygdala rapidly reacts to and evaluates the emotional saliency of stimuli (Victor et al., 2010) and is involved in processing facial displays of affect (Fitzgerald, Angstadt, Jelsone, Nathan, & Phan, 2006). For example, neuroimaging studies have consistently shown that the amygdala is active in response to happy, fearful, and sad faces in healthy adults (Fusar-Poli et al.,
A core function of the subgenual cingulate cortex is to regulate amygdala activity, in effect reducing high emotional responsivity to threatening stimuli (Phillips, Drevets, Rauch, & Lane, 2003). The insula has been associated with processing the subjective experience of emotions, particularly feelings of anger and disgust (Suzuki, 2012), and it is also thought to play a role in understanding emotions of others (Wicker et al., 2003).

Other limbic structures (i.e., hypothalamus, orbital frontal cortex, hippocampus) regulate autonomic and endocrine function (e.g., hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis activity), emotional decision-making, and function in emotional memory formation (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2000; Bechara, 2004; Price & Drevets, 2010).

Individual structures within neocortical and paralimbic regions are themselves reciprocally interconnected; however, via direct anatomical connections, the subcortical structures (i.e., rostral cingulate cortex, striatum, and thalamus) facilitate communication between areas of the cortex and limbic system (Mayberg, 1997; Mayberg, 2003). The integrity of these individual fronto-limbic structures and the links between them collectively control emotional processing; therefore, dysfunction within or between components of this system can lead to affective disturbance.

In general, Mayberg suggests that depressive symptomatology is a consequence of hypo and hyperactivity in neocortical and paralimbic structures respectfully (Mayberg, 1997; Stuhrmann, Suslow, & Dannlowski, 2011). Numerous neuroimaging studies have expanded upon the behavioral research of emotion processing in MDD and have provided significant support for this claim (e.g., Cullen et al., 2009; Cullen et al., 2010; Drevets, Price, & Furey, 2008; Greicius, 2008; Price & Drevets, 2012; Savitz & Drevets, 2009; Steingard et al., 2002).
Because, emotional facial expressions are 1) efficient at eliciting responses in fronto-limbic areas (Fusar-Poli et al., 2009), 2) may be particularly sensitive to processing biases in MDD (Stuhrmann et al., 2011), and 3) are of primary relevance to this present study, research in this area that has investigated alterations in brain regions specific to Mayberg’s model is reviewed in detail. A majority of the studies presented employ the use of two different types of stimuli: masked and unmasked faces that examine neural activity to unconscious and conscious stimuli respectfully. This, in addition to differences in sample characteristics and statistical approaches, likely explain some of the heterogeneity of findings.

Alterations in Emotional Face Processing: Adult MDD

Most adult neuroimaging studies of emotion processing in response to faces have focused on the amygdala. Specifically, researchers have suggested that increased activity in the amygdala when viewing negative emotional faces may be a biomarker for MDD (Arnone et al., 2012; Victor et al., 2010).

For example, Arnone et al. (2012) compared blood-oxygen-level-dependent (BOLD) response in the amygdala in a large sample of moderately depressed adults to that of adults in remission and healthy controls. They found increased bilateral amygdala activity in those with acute depression symptoms when viewing sad vs. neutral faces. These authors further noted that depressed adults successfully treated with the antidepressant citroloapram showed normalization of this heightened amygdala activity, suggesting that the amygdala plays a specific role in processing sad faces in acute phases of depressive illness and is a region related to symptom improvement.
Whereas Arnone et al. (2012) investigated explicit processing of sad versus neutral emotions, Victor et al. (2010) examined unconscious emotion processing in depressed adults to that of healthy controls using a masked face paradigm. Results from this study suggested that individuals ill with depression and those who remitted from the illness had greater bilateral amygdala activity in response to sad faces outside of conscious awareness whereas healthy adults had greater left amygdala activity when unconsciously processing happy faces. Unlike Arnone et al. (2012) no group differences were found when comparing response to emotional faces presented explicitly.

Hyper amygdala responsivity to masked sad faces and hypo amygdala response to masked happy faces has been replicated by Suslow et al. (2010). In addition, increased left amygdala response to masked fearful faces has also been reported in adult MDD (Sheline et al., 200; Peluso et al., 2009). These results suggest that that biases for processing mood congruent emotional stimuli in depressed adults are present at the neural level outside of conscious awareness.

Aside from amygdala findings, other regions within the fronto-limbic neural circuit have been implicated in emotional face processing in MDD. For example, increased insula activity has been associated with viewing sad (Keedwell, Andrew, Williams, Brammer, & Phillips, 2005; Suslow et al., 2010), fearful, angry (Zhong et al., 2011) and disgusted faces (S. A. Surguladze et al., 2010). Similarly, decreased functional activity has been observed in areas of the dorsal lateral PFC and orbital frontal cortex (Keedwell et al., 2005; Lawrence et al., 2004; Zhong et al., 2011). Findings within the cingulate have been mixed (Stuhrmann et al., 2011).

The studies illustrated above present data that were based on adult patients with
MDD. It is possible that findings in this specific population may not be relevant to MDD at different times during development. For this reason, researchers have begun to investigate emotion processing in depressed adolescents using similar neuroimaging methods.

**Alterations in Emotional Face Processing: Adolescent MDD**

Compared to the adult literature, there have only been a handful of investigations examining neural correlates of emotional face processing in adolescents, and it is thus an area that remains severely understudied. Monk et al. (2008) found that children and adolescents at high risk for developing MDD had greater activation in the amygdala and nucleus accumbens when passively viewing fearful faces. Constraining attention to the same images resulted in increased medial PFC activation and concurrent normalization of the amygdala response, suggesting that directed attention towards emotional stimuli may engage higher order cognitive regions and improve emotion regulatory processing in those at risk for MDD.

In a sample of medication naïve, depressed adolescents without comorbid psychiatric diagnoses, Yang et al. (2010) employed an emotional faces matching task and found that adolescent MDD was associated with increased anterior cingulate cortex and left amygdala activation in response to fearful, sad, and happy faces as compared to healthy controls. In this task, participants are presented with a picture of a human face and then asked to match the emotion on that particular face to one of two additional faces.

Beesdo et al. (2009) compared amygdala activity in depressed and anxious youth using an emotional faces task that required varying levels of attentive control. When
passively viewing emotional faces, Beesdo et al. (2009) found that adolescents with MDD had decreased (and opposite) bilateral amygdala response compared to both healthy and anxious comparison groups. However, when selectively attending to the emotional valence of each image (ensured by having participants rate the severity of the emotion displayed on a likert scale, e.g., “How fearful is this face?”), MDD and anxious participants showed similarly increased left amygdala activity. Results suggest that, while passively viewing faces differentiates psychiatric disorders, attending to the emotional salience of the stimuli results in limbic hyperactivation common to both depression and anxious symptoms in adolescents.

Examining changes in brain function in adolescent MDD following antidepressant treatment, Tao et al (2012) concluded that increased brain activation to fearful faces in amygdalar, orbitofrontal, and subgenual cingulate regions normalized following administration of an 8-week fluoxetine trial.

Taken together, the relatively few studies investigating emotional face processing in adolescent MDD implicate alterations in areas of the fronto-limbic network, most notably the amygdala; however, more research is needed to clarify inconsistencies in regards to directionality of the abnormal responses observed.

**Effects of Co-morbid Anxiety and Antidepressants**

As illustrated by the study by Tao et al. (2012), the use of antidepressant medications alter brain activity in areas important for emotional regulation (Tanti & Belzung, 2010b), specifically where amygdala reactivity to fearful and happy faces has been shown to diminish with antidepressant use (Sheline et al., 2001; Tao et al., 2012). In addition, alterations in fronto-limbic neural circuitry is not unique to MDD. For example,
increased amygdala response to emotional stimuli is well documented in anxiety disorders (e.g., (Wolfensberger, Veltman, Hoogendijk, Boomsma, & de Geus, 2008). It is therefore critically important that studies investigating emotion processing and associated neural function in MDD account for the potential confounding effects of antidepressant use and psychiatric comorbidity.

In depressed adolescents, only three known studies to date have controlled for concurrent anxiety and medication status when examining fronto-limbic circuitry with emotional faces tasks (Beesdo et al., 2009; Tao et al, 2012, Yang et al, 2010). While findings from these studies suggest that heightened amygdala reactivity is present in medication-free, diagnostically pure MDD, additional research is needed to confirm these findings in adolescents and to explore other important regions within the fronto-limbic network in this population.

Overall, findings in adolescents appear consistent with the adult literature, suggesting that neural underpinnings of MDD are consistent across development; however, the relatively sparse data investigating emotion processing in younger populations that account for confounding effects of psychotropic medication and co-morbid anxiety makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions. As several authors note, additional research is critically needed (Tao et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2010). For this reason, the present study aimed to examine brain function in adolescents diagnosed with MDD in response to an emotional faces task using fMRI methodology.

Based on previous work in both adolescents and adults, it was hypothesized that, compared to healthy controls, participants with MDD would show increased amygdala activity and decreased prefrontal activity when viewing fearful versus happy facial
expressions, but that these findings would only be present when comparing controls to an unmedicated MDD subsample. It was also hypothesized that amygdala responsivity would be greatest among depressed individuals with a concurrent anxiety disorder. Lastly, it was expected that secondary structures within neocortical, subcortical, and paralimbic brain regions would be implicated.

**Method**

**Participants**

50 adolescents (34 with MDD and 16 HC), ages 12-20 years old ($M = 15.8, SD = 1.9$), were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were predominately female (78%) and Caucasian (72%). A majority of participants (92%) were right handed. Study inclusion and exclusion was determined by an extensive screening process that included an initial phone screen, parent and child in-person diagnostic interviews, and a battery of self-report questionnaires (see Measures). All controls had to be free from any current or lifetime psychiatric disorder and could not have a family history of depression. Depressed adolescents were included if they met current DSM-IV-TR criteria for a primary diagnosis of major depressive disorder. Use of psychotropic medication was permitted and used by 35% of the depressed sample at the time of the study. 60% of MDD adolescents presented with a current co-morbid psychiatric disorder (21% endorsed symptoms consistent with more than one co-morbid diagnosis). Of those with psychiatric co-morbidity, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (29%) and Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (15%) were endorsed most frequently. Individuals with a history of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or pervasive developmental disorder were excluded from study participation. Additional exclusion criteria consisted of full scale IQ less than 80 as
measured by the Wechsler Abbreviated Intelligence Scale (WASI; Wechsler, 1999),
history of serious head injury, medical illness, medical instability, and any MRI
contraindication.

Measures

Psychiatric and Intellectual Assessments

Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia for School-Age Children,
*present and lifetime version, K-SADS-PL* (Kaufman et al., 1997). This study employed
the K-SADS-PL, a semi-structured clinical interview used to assess current and lifetime
DSM-IV-TR Axis 1 disorders in children and adolescents. The K-SADS-PL has been
shown to have acceptable concurrent validity in addition to both interrater (93=100%) and
test-retest (kappa = .63-1.0) reliability (Kaufman et al., 1997). All interviews were
conducted by trained, graduate level (or higher) assessors. Training in how to administer
the KSADS included KSDAS observation, participating in mock role-play interviews,
and conducting interviews supervised by licensed providers. In order to maintain
adherence to the instrument and to prevent assessor drift, weekly group supervision
meetings were held in which individual cases were presented and discussed.

*Beck Depression Inventory, second edition, BDI-II* (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The BDI-II is a 21-item self-report questionnaire that measures severity of depressive symptoms. Each item is rated on a 0-3 scale with a maximum total score of 63. Total scores between 0-13 indicate minimal depression, 14-19 mild depression, 20-28 moderate depression, and 29-63 severe depression (Beck, Steer, Ball, & Ranieri, 1996). The BDI-II is a widely used instrument in psychiatric research and has been shown to
have adequate concurrent validity and high (a = .91) internal consistency (Beck et al., 1996).

**Behavioral Paradigm (Emotional Faces Task)**

All participants completed two 5.2 minute runs of an emotional faces task where standardized grayscale images of adult men and women with either fearful or happy expressions were presented in a block design format and contrasted with fixation blocks (Ekman & Friesen, 1976). Images were presented on a screen placed at the back of the scanner and then projected to participants by two mirrors attached to a standard head coil. Each run was identical in terms of order of item presentation and consisted of 13 24-second blocks (5 fixation (C), 4 happy (H), 4 fearful (F) presented in a counterbalanced fashion: CFHCHFCHFCFHC). During experimental blocks, fearful or happy images were presented for 200 msec and followed by 1300 msecs of either a fixation cross or an “o”. During control blocks, fixation crosses were presented sequentially for 1500 msec. While facial expressions presenting numerous negative emotions have been shown to activate the amygdala (Fitzgerald et al., 2006), a key area of interest in this study, fearful stimuli were chosen based on research suggesting that amygdala response is more sensitive to viewing fearful faces than sad faces (Fusar-Poli et al., 2009; Sheline et al., 2001).

**Image acquisition**

Scanning was conducted using a research-dedicated 3.0 Tesla Siemens Trio scanner and 12-channel radio-frequency (RF) head coil. A high-resolution T1-weighted anatomical image was acquired for each participant using a magnetization prepared gradient echo sequence (MPRAGE; 224 coronal slices; TR = 2530ms; TE = 3.65ms; TI =
1100ms; flip angle = 7°; FOV=256mm, voxel size = 1x1x1mm; matrix size=256x256).

Functional data were acquired using an echo planar imaging sequence (EPI) where 156 T2*-weighted whole brain functional volumes (34 3.9mm interleaved contiguous axial slices, AC-PC aligned with a -30° tilt, TR = 2000ms; TE = 28 ms; flip angle = 80°, FOV = 200mm; voxel size = 3.1 x 3.1 x 3.9 mm; matrix = 64x64) were obtained in conjunction with the emotional faces task.

**Procedure**

Depressed adolescents were recruited from inpatient and outpatient clinics at the University of Minnesota and from community advertisements. Healthy controls were recruited from flyers posted throughout the Minneapolis and St. Paul metro area. This study was approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board.

Interested participants underwent an initial phone screening to assess for basic inclusion and exclusion criteria. Those who appeared eligible were scheduled for a screening visit where they received additional study information, signed informed assent/consent and completed diagnostic and self-report assessments. Trained, graduate level assessors conducted separate K-SADS-PL interviews with the adolescent and one parent where diagnoses were based on a consensus between the two reports. Enrolled participants then completed a subsequent visit consisting of the MRI scan at the University of Minnesota Center for Magnetic Resonance Research, where both anatomical and functional images were collected.

During the emotional faces task, participants held a response pad in their right hand and were instructed to press a key with their pointer finger any time an ‘o’ appeared on the screen. This was done to ensure that participants were viewing all the stimuli and
that they remained attentive throughout the task. Following the MRI scan, participants received compensation for completing study procedures.

**Statistical Analysis**

**Demographics and Clinical Data**

Demographic and clinical variables were analyzed using a series of one-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVs) and Chi-squared tests in SPSS (Version 19.0). Fisher’s Exact Test was used to account for low frequency categorical data.

**Functional Data**

Imaging data were processed and analyzed using the FEAT package in FSL 4.1.9 (www.fmrib.ox.ac.uk). Functional data were visually inspected for movement-related artifacts, where volumes with relative displacement in excess of 1.5 mm in any direction were removed. Single volumes preceding and following excess displacement were also excluded. In total, 155 total volumes (1.9%) were not included in the analysis on account of movement. Images were preprocessed with high-pass temporal filtration (Gaussian-weighted least squares straight line fitting, sigma = 75s), motion (MCFLIRT) and slice timing correction (to adjust for timing differences in slice acquisition within each volume). EPI images were co-registered with each individual’s anatomical image (brain extracted using BET and visually inspected for quality), normalized to Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) standard space with FNIRT, and spatially smoothed (FWHM 6mm). A first level GLM analysis was employed to regress the model specified by the task onto the blood oxygen level dependent (BOLD) response of each participant. The two independent runs of the emotional faces tasks were combined at a second level of analysis using a fixed effects model that allows for within-subject, multi-session
analyses. Whole brain group level analyses were conducted using a mixed-effects model (FLAME). Cluster-wise significant testing was used where multiple comparison corrections were carried out using Gaussian random field theory (min Z=2.32; cluster significance = p<0.05, corrected). Group level analyses produced Z-score maps for comparisons between stimuli conditions.

Follow-up correlational analyses were run to examine associations between clinical variables and BOLD response. Percent signal change for significant clusters were extracted for each participant using Featquery. Pearson correlation coefficients were subsequently calculated using SPSS.

**Results**

**Demographic and Clinical Characteristics**

There were no differences in age \[F(2,47)=0.82, \ p=0.45\], gender \[\chi^2(2, \ N=50)=1.76, \ p=0.42\], race \[\chi^2(8, \ N=50)=5.88, \ p=1.00\], or handedness \[\chi^2(2, \ N=50)=1.52, \ p=0.36\] between HC and depressed participants. As expected, one-way ANOVA results indicated that groups differed significantly in regards to depression severity \[F(2,29)=9.73, \ p<0.01\]. Specifically, medicated \(M=23.50, \ SD=13.07, \ p<0.05\) and unmedicated depressed adolescents \(M=28.05, \ SD=14.19, \ p<0.01\) reported average BDI scores reflective of moderate depression (Beck et al., 1996), which were significantly higher than those observed in healthy controls \(M=3.71, \ SD=3.04\). There were also significant group differences in IQ \[F(2, 47)=7.15, \ p<0.01\], where unmedicated MDD participants \(M=98.95, \ SD=16.43\) had lower IQ scores than both medicated MDD \(M=114.17, \ SD=11.62, \ p<0.05\) and HC \(M=113.81, \ SD=11.44, \ p<0.01\). There were no differences in IQ between HC and medicated MDD \(p=0.98\). It is important to note that
IQ scores in unmedicated MDD participants were still within the average range of intellectual ability (Wechsler, 1999). The proportion of comorbidity between the two depressed groups did not differ significantly [$\chi^2(8, N=50)=0.40, p=0.84$]. Demographic and clinical information is presented in Table 1.

**Imaging Results**

Whole brain analyses examined four comparisons between task stimuli (fear > fixation, happy > fixation, happy > fear, fear > happy) separately for both the HC and full MDD groups to ensure that the task activated the expected regions. Analyses to examine differences in activation between the two groups were then conducted.

**HC and Full MDD: Individual Analyses**

BOLD response to fearful expressions in comparison to viewing fixation yielded significant clusters in both HC and MDD groups covering regions of the bilateral supramarginal gyrus and bilateral temporal occipital fusiform cortex. In addition, HC had increased activation in areas of the right middle temporal gyrus, left thalamus, left parietal operculum, and left lateral occipital cortex. MDDs had additional clusters of activation to this contrast in areas of the posterior cingulate gyrus, paracingulate gyrus, right hippocampus, right parahippocampal gyrus, and right frontal pole.

BOLD response in the happy greater than fixation condition yielded significant clusters covering bilateral temporal occipital fusiform and parietal operculum cortices in HC. In the MDD sample, additional regions of activation included the right supramarginal gyrus, right frontal pole, anterior cingulate cortex and paracingulate gyrus. These two contrasts (fear > fixation, happy > fixation) compare brain activity to complex facial stimuli to that of simple, neutral, non-face stimuli; therefore, activation in these
areas, particularly the fusiform cortex, supramarginal gyrus, and middle temporal gyrus would be expected given their role in face perception, recognition and processing (Haxby, Hoffman, & Gobbini, 2000; Kanwisher & Yovel, 2006; Platek et al., 2006).

In HC, no significant clusters survived thresholding at the $z=2.32, p<0.05$ level of significance when examining activation to the fear greater than happy contrast. However, activation in areas of the right hemisphere including the temporal fusiform cortex and regions of the limbic system (parahippocampal gyrus, pallidum, putamen, thalamus, and amygdala) were present at a lower level of significance ($z=1.96, p<0.05$). In the full MDD sample, fear greater than happy contrasts yielded significant clusters in regions of the left temporal fusiform cortex, left middle temporal gyrus, left insular cortex, left amygdala, left hippocampus, left nucleus accumbens, left dorsal medial prefrontal cortex, bilateral superior parietal cortex, bilateral medial orbital frontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex.

No significant clusters were observed for the happy greater than fear contrast for either group. Anatomical locations of peak activation for each significant cluster observed among all four conditions in HC and MDD individually are presented in Table 2.

**HC and Full MDD: Group Analyses**

No group differences in activation were found between HC and the full MDD group for any of the four contrasts. As previously mentioned, antidepressant medications alter fronto-limbic function (Tanti & Belzung, 2010b), specifically within the amygdala (Sheline et al., 2001; Tao et al., 2012). To explore whether medication use could account for the lack of differences observed within the full sample, subsequent analysis examined
the four contrasts between HC and both the medicated and unmedicated MDD groups separately.

**HC and Medicated MDD: Group Analyses**

There were no group differences between the HC and Medicated MDD groups for any of the four contrasts.

**HC and Unmedicated MDD: Group Analyses**

Group differences were not observed between the HC and unmedicated MDD groups on either emotion versus fixation contrast.

Group comparison for the fear greater than happy contrast indicated that unmedicated MDD participants had lower activation in one cluster covering areas of the right thalamus, right insula, right hippocampus and right superior temporal gyrus compared to HC. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1. No differences were observed between the two groups when examining the happy greater than fear contrast.

**MDD and Co-morbid Anxiety: Group Analyses**

Group comparisons examining brain activity between MDD with and without comorbid anxiety were conducted. Due to sample size limitations, these comparisons were carried out in the full MDD sample only, not between medicated and unmedicated groups separately. MDD with anxiety disorders and those without did not differ in regards to medication status [$\chi^2(1, N=34)=0.59, p=.044$].

No group differences were found between groups of differing comorbidity status for either the fear greater than happy or happy greater than fear contrast. This suggests that the presence of concurrent, clinical anxiety was not associated with an altered response to fearful or happy facial expressions.
**BOLD Response and Depression Severity**

Pearson correlation analyses were run to examine how depression severity in the unmedicated MDD sample was related to BOLD response in the cluster that survived thresholding at the group comparison level for the fear greater than happy contrast (right insular/thalamic/hippocampal cluster). BDI scores were available for a subsample (N=19) of the unmedicated MDD group. All scores were demeaned (M=28.05, SD=14.19) prior to analysis. Results (Figure 2) indicate that BOLD percent signal change and BDI scores were not significantly correlated (r (19)=-0.15, p=0.54).

**Discussion**

A wide body of literature in adults and adolescents suggests that emotional processing abnormalities in depression are related to alterations in fronto-limbic neurocircuitry. This study aimed to expand upon previous findings by comparing differences in brain function in response to fearful and happy faces among clinically depressed and healthy adolescents using fMRI methods.

Areas of the fusiform face area and other supplementary brain regions crucial for face recognition and processing (Haxby et al., 2000; Kanwisher & Yovel, 2006; Platek et al., 2006) showed greater activation to both fearful and happy faces as compared to presentation of a fixation cross in both HC and MDD. In addition, when MDD and HC groups were examined separately, fearful faces elicited greater response in areas of the amygdala than did happy faces. It is important to note, however, that these findings in HC were present to a lesser degree than they were for the MDD group. These data suggest that the emotional faces task used in this study, which has been widely employed in a
variety of forms in previous research, activated expected brain areas and was appropriate for testing the specific hypotheses presented.

Contrary to expectations, however, neither the medicated nor unmedicated MDD groups demonstrated significantly different levels of amygdalar activation compared to controls when viewing fearful faces. These findings oppose those in the adolescent literature that have identified specific alterations in amygdala activity in response to fearful facial stimuli (Beesdo et al., 2009; Monk et al., 2008; Tao et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2010). However, while these studies employed the use of whole brain analyses, amygdalar findings primarily emerged when using a region of interest (ROI) approach. The amygdala is a relatively small brain region, and it is possible that BOLD activity that does exist in this area fails to survive multiple comparison corrections that account for whole brain statistical tests. In addition, slight differences in task presentation may have contributed to the null results observed in this study. Whereas the present study compared happy and fearful faces viewed in conjunction with a neutral target-response task, Tao et al. (2012) compared fear greater than neutral expressions and Beesdo and colleagues (2009) examined amygdala activity while participants actively rated the intensity of the emotional stimulus. Similarly, the paradigm employed by Yang et al (2010) presented each emotional stimulus for several seconds in duration, which would invariably result in a different hemodynamic response than that to stimuli in this study, which were displayed at significantly quicker intervals.

In a review of the adult literature, Stuhrmann (2011) noted that half of the studies that investigated facial emotion processing in major depression failed to yield significant amygdala findings. Of those that did, most compared activation to sad facial stimuli. In
response to the lack of findings following explicitly displayed fearful faces, some researchers have suggested that mood congruent processing bias and associated fronto-limbic dysfunction in MDD may be better measured using sad rather than fearful emotional cues (Arnone et al., 2012).

Additionally, several previous studies that report heightened amygdala activity in MDD included participants with comorbid anxiety (e.g., Victor et al. 2010), which has lead Arnone et al. (2012) to suggest that amygdala findings to fear conditions in MDD may be a consequence of diagnostic comorbidity, not depressive symptomatology more specifically. Results from this study do not appear to support this claim. While it was hypothesized that responsivity would be greatest in depressed adolescents with concurrent anxiety, no differences in amygdala activation were observed between those with and without a comorbid anxiety disorder. However, the present study did not exclude for other types of psychiatric comorbidity, namely Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Both of these illnesses have been associated with fronto-limbic alterations in previous research (Matthys, Vanderschuren, & Schutter, 2012; Posner et al., 2011), so it is possible that examining a diagnostically diverse sample of depressed adolescents in general could have contributed to the lack of amygdala findings between 1) the HC and MDD groups, and 2) the MDD groups with and without comorbid anxiety in this study.

Also contrary to hypotheses were the lack of findings in prefrontal activity between HC and either medicated or unmedicated MDD participants. It was expected that depressed adolescents would demonstrate reduced PFC function to fearful faces, perhaps reflecting a decreased ability to regulate limbic system activation in response to negative
stímuí. According to Stuhrmann et al. (2011), literature on PFC activity in MDD emotion processing is highly inconsistent, where studies have reported increased (Keedwell et al., 2005), decreased (Lawrence et al., 2004), and no differences in activation between patient and control groups. The mixed findings make it difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding the role of prefrontal activity in emotional regulation processing in adolescent MDD; however, it is possible that variations in the degree to which attention and cognitive control are required in emotional face paradigms could contribute to the lack of consistent results (Killgore & Yurgelun-Todd, 2006).

Results from this study do suggest that adolescent MDD is associated with altered activity within other regions of fronto-limbic circuitry. Specifically, depressed adolescents showed reduced activation in areas of the right thalamus, insula and hippocampus when viewing fearful faces, a pattern of findings that has been previously reported by Townsend et al. (2010) in depressed adults. Similarly, when employing an emotional faces task nearly identical to the one presented in this study, Tao et al. (2012) also found alterations in regions of the insula and right hippocampus among depressed adolescents compared to controls when viewing fearful faces. However, authors note that these findings did not survive multiple comparison corrections.

Structural equation and path modeling studies using positron emission tomography in depressed populations indicate that thalamic and limbic regions, such as the hippocampus and insula, possess strong connections with the frontal cortex (e.g., anterior cingulate cortex, orbital frontal cortex) and amygdala (Seminowicz et al., 2004). According to Mayberg’s model (Mayberg 1997, 2003), communication between hippocampal/insular regions and neocortical structures is mediated in part by thalamic
activity, where the thalamus serves to relay information between paralimbic and cortical areas (Morgane, Galler, & Mokler, 2005). Meta-analytic results from imaging studies in emotion and cognition indicate that reduced right thalamic activity, specifically, is involved in biased processing of emotional salience and in difficulties with affective switching in MDD (Diener et al., 2012).

In regards to the insula, studies suggest that the structure not only plays a role in the subjective experience of emotion (Suzuki, 2012) but in relaying automatic responses to aversive and threatening stimuli to the amygdala (Ongur & Price, 2000; Phelps et al., 2001). Additionally, the hippocampus has been implicated in the inhibition of both the stress response system and of anxiety to potentially threatening cues in general (Lopez, Akil, & Watson, 1999; McNaughton & Gray, 2000).

Given these findings, it is possible that decreased activity in thalamic and paralimbic regions observed among depressed adolescents in this study reflects deficits in the ability to elicit cognitive control from higher cortical regions and to accurately respond to and process the emotional significance of fearful stimuli respectfully. More research is needed to explain how this might relate to negative emotion processing biases in adolescent MDD more specifically. However, Mayberg (1997) notes that failure in or between any component of the fronto-limbic neural circuit contributes to depressive symptomology. Results from this study suggest that deficits in emotional processing among adolescents with MDD could be a consequence of functional abnormalities within insular, thalamic, and hippocampal regions.

The pattern of observed findings also adds to the literature suggesting that MDD is associated with alterations in functional laterality, where in general, depression has
been found to be associated with a right hemisphere dominance as reflected by right hemisphere hyperactivation and a left hemisphere hypoactivation (Hecht, 2010). However, Diener et al. (2012) noted that subcortical structures appear to show the reverse pattern, where there is reduced right hemisphere activity in depressed samples. In this study, decreased activation in the MDD group was similarly constrained to regions within the right hemisphere. Consistent with the present study, Townsend et al. (2010) found reduced right hemisphere activity in the insula and in medial temporal, occipital, and hippocampal gyri in a sample of unmedicated depressed adults in response to an emotional faces task. Klimes-Dougan et al. (in submission) also identified associations between hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) function and resting state functional connectivity between fronto-limbic brain regions in the right hemisphere among depressed adolescents compared to controls. Various explanations have been proposed as to the functional importance of this asymmetry. There is evidence to suggest that the left hemisphere is implicated more in processing negative emotions and the right hemisphere is implicated more in processing positive emotions (Townsend et al., 2010); however, these conclusions remain mixed (Alves, Aznar-Casanova, & Fukusima, 2009).

The results of this study provide important information about regions associated with emotion processing in adolescent MDD; however, there are a number of study limitations that should be noted. The most important limitation is the small sample size, which limits the power to consistently detect group differences. In addition, region of interest analyses were not conducted to evaluate amygdala and area-specific prefrontal activity in response to task stimuli. Most studies in adolescent MDD employed the use of this type of analysis, which reduces the number of voxel comparisons being made and
improves the likelihood of observing true statistical differences in activation within small structures. ROI analyses are currently being conducted as a follow-up to the whole-brain approach described here and will hopefully provide further evidence regarding the role of these structures in adolescent MDD. Failing to account for other psychiatric comorbidities (e.g., ADHD) presents another study limitation. Similarly, IQ was significantly lower in the unmedicated MDD group, which was not accounted for during analysis. Although it is unlikely that variations in intellectual ability are associated with performance on a passive viewing task, this potential confound should be evaluated in future steps. Lastly, this study only examined brain function in response to happy and fearful faces. It is possible, as Victor et al. (2010) suggested, that other types of emotional stimuli better elicit fronto-limbic response in adolescents with MDD. Brain activity in response to other emotions will be necessary to further understand the neural correlates of emotion processing in this population.

This study adds to the current literature on emotional face processing in adolescent MDD and provides evidence for specific insular, hippocampal and thalamic deficits in response to fearful stimuli. Findings are consistent with previous research that has failed to identify differences in amygdala activity in unmedicated MDD (Townsend et al., 2010). Results do not support previously proposed hypotheses of hyper amygdala and hypo prefrontal activity in this group. Instead, findings suggest that difficulties in emotion processing and regulation in depressed youth are more associated with abnormalities in secondary subcortical and paralimbic brain regions within the fronto-limbic neural network. To clarify inconsistencies within the literature, future research should examine brain function using larger sample sizes and higher magnet field
strengths. Similarly, longitudinal studies of emotion processing deficits in adolescent MDD are needed in order to better identify whether abnormalities are state or trait dependent. Such information has the potential to advance our understanding of the neurobiological underpinnings of abnormal emotion processing during this critically important developmental period.
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10.1016/j.biopsych.2009.07.023; 10.1016/j.biopsych.2009.07.023


Table 1. Demographic and clinical data for the full sample.

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<th>Unmedicated MDD (N=22)</th>
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<th>(p)</th>
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<td>114.17 11.62</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>2 9.1</td>
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</table>

HC=Healthy Controls, MDD=Major Depression, AA=African American, NA=Native American, Any Dx=Any co-morbid diagnosis reported. GAD=Generalized Anxiety Disorder, SAD=Social Anxiety Disorder, PTSD=Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, OCD=Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, SP=Specific Phobia, ADHD=Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder, ODD=Oppositional Defiant Disorder, DYS=Dysthymia

\(^a\) Unmedicated MDD significantly lower than HC \((p<0.01)\) and Medicated MDD \((p<0.05)\); \(^b\) Unmedicated MDD \((p<0.01)\) and Medicated MDD \((p<0.05)\) significantly higher than HC

\(^*\) BDI based on a subsample of participants: HC \((N=7)\), Medicated MDD \((N=6)\), Unmedicated \((N=19)\)
Table 2. Anatomical location and z-score associated with peak activation of significant clusters observed between HC (N=16) and the full MDD sample (N=34)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>Anatomical Location</th>
<th>MNI Coordinates (mm)</th>
<th>z-score</th>
<th>Cluster (voxels)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fear &gt; +</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>R frontal pole</td>
<td>34 50 4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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</table>

Findings based on initial z threshold value = 2.32; clusters corrected for multiple comparisons
R=right hemisphere, L=left hemisphere, +=fixation cross
*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Figure 1.

Areas in right hemisphere (depicted via a (a) coronal slice and (b) axial slice) that showed decreased activation in unmedicated MDD participants compared to healthy controls in response to the fearful > happy contrast. Cluster (664 voxels) contains regions of the right hippocampus (MNI coordinates: x=32, y=-38, z=-8), right thalamus (x=6, y=-18, z=2), and right insula (x=38, y=-10, z=6). Voxels exceeded initial threshold, $z = 2.32$, and survived multiple comparison correction, $p<0.05$. 
Scatterplot depicting nonsignificant correlation ($r (19) = -0.15, p = 0.54$) between BOLD percent signal change and depression severity score (group-centered BDI) in a subsample of the unmedicated MDD group ($N=19$). Percent signal change was measured in the cluster (MNI coordinates: $x=32, y=-38, z=-8$) that survived statistical thresholding at the group