Psychological flexibility under fire: Testing the incremental validity of experiential avoidance

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1. Introduction

Experiential avoidance (EA) is the avoidance or suppression of sensations, thoughts, and feelings (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). It encompasses attempts to cognitively manipulate the effects of unpleasant events (e.g., distracting oneself from anxious feelings), and to avoid such experiences through behavioural change (e.g., taking sick days to avoid work stressors). EA is commonly viewed as an individual difference variable, and has primarily been advanced through its clinical relevance (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), with some psychologists proposing its potential as a general diagnostic factor (Hayes et al., 1996).

Befitting this clinical purpose, EA has been associated with a range of psychological disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse (Bond et al., 2011) and social anxiety disorder (Kashdan et al., 2013), as well as negative outcomes such as relationship difficulties (Reddy, Meis, Erbes, Polusny, & Compton, 2011). Furthermore, decreases in EA function as a change mechanism in some psychotherapies (Flaxman & Bond, 2010). However, EA can be meaningfully studied within subclinical samples: for example, in the context of maladaptive perfectionism and worry (Santanello & Gardner, 2007), or emotional reactions to films (Sloan, 2004).

1.1. Establishing discriminant and incremental validity

The most widely used measure of experiential avoidance is the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-2; Bond et al., 2011), which measures individuals’ fear about, and perceived control over, their emotions and memories. However, some concerns have been raised about the AAQ-2’s conceptual independence. Criticism has focused on the considerable overlap between the AAQ-2 and negative affect, as well as trait neuroticism, with estimates ranging between $r = 0.55–0.74$ (Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011). Discriminant validity from mood and neuroticism is critical for EA measures like the AAQ-2, as they represent what may be called ‘meta-affective’ functions (affect about affect). The conceptual uniqueness of EA is its consideration of how people feel about their feelings (similar to ‘thoughts about thoughts’ in the literature on metacognition; Briñol & DeMarree, 2012), and therefore should not be redundant with measures of feelings themselves. Indeed, the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (MEAQ; Gámez et al., 2011) was developed as a new measure of experiential avoidance, largely to curb the AAQ-2’s issues of discriminant validity issues (from mood and neuroticism).

Gámez et al. (2011) found that the MEAQ was less highly correlated with negative affect and neuroticism ($r = 0.44$ to $0.54$) than the AAQ-2.
as sufficient. While this is an important first step, we believe that examining correlations represents a limited means of validating a measure as sufficiently discriminant. It is difficult to establish a precise correlation coefficient expected of independent constructs. Indeed, by EAs theoretical logic, neuroticism and affect should converge with EA measures (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). The pursuit of validation, therefore, cannot focus exclusively on minimizing the correlations between EA and its conceptual cousins. Instead, a crucial question is whether these overlaps are sufficiently severe to make EA measures functionally redundant with prior measures. The classic method to investigate this question is the incremental validity of the construct (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003). As originally conceptualized by Cronbach and Gleser (1957), a measure is incrementally valid when it can explain additional variance in a particular outcome, beyond that already explained by prior (or more practical) measures. Gámez et al. (2011) indicated the MEAQ’s mixed incremental validity in predicting quality-of-life and psychopathological outcomes; for instance, a minority (40%) of the 91 correlations they computed between the MEAQ and its hypothesized associations remained at least moderately related \((r < 0.30)\), after controlling for only neuroticism.1 Thus, neuroticism (and likely negative affect) may represent substantial threats to EA’s construct validity.

Other attempts to establish the incremental validity of EA measures have been limited in crucial ways. For example, in demonstrating the incremental validity of their short-form EA measure, Kashdan et al. (2013) employed brief versions of their central covariates (e.g. negative affect, self-control depletion). Because they justified these abbreviated covariates only by showing that they had acceptable inter-item reliability, it is somewhat unclear whether these are valid measures of the constructs they are using as covariates.2 Further, Kashdan et al. did not control for several relevant variables previously associated with EA (e.g., neuroticism, Gámez et al., 2011), or of conceptual similarity to EA (e.g., attachment anxiety; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). It is difficult to be confident in a measure’s incremental validity, when the covariates are of unclear validity, and possibly not comprehensive.

One final observation concerns the relative absence of work considering the role of attachment orientations as potential covariates (Fraley et al., 2000). Attachment anxiety has many of the same associations as EA, such as elevated physiological reactions to stressors (Gallo & Matthews, 2006) and heightened emotional experiences during social conflicts (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997). Indeed, the conceptual links between attachment orientations and EA have been noted elsewhere (Vanwoerden, Kalpakci, & Sharp, 2015). We therefore include attachment anxiety as a covariate for EA.

1.2. Predicting reactions to social stimuli

Despite the focus on clinical implications, some literature has supported EA’s role in everyday social situations. For example, EA is associated with intensified affective reactions to emotionally-charged films (Sloan, 2004), and elevated anxiety/distress following physiological stressors (Feldner, Zvolensky, Eifert, & Spira, 2003). These ‘emotion-amplifying’ effects of high-EA individuals are based on their attempts to avoid aversive thoughts and feelings, which increase the intensity of emotions (Gold & Wegner, 1995). Indeed, EA is positively associated with distress (Kahn & Garrison, 2009). These findings suggest that when emotional provocations occur, EA exacerbates reactions.

One emotional conflict common to many young adults is the experience of romantic jealousy (Marazziti et al., 2003). Reactive jealousy is when an individual becomes aware of an objective threat to their relationship. And suspicious jealousy is when jealousy arises without an objective cause (Bringle & Buunk, 1991). As the nature of suspicious jealousy lies in interpreting ambiguous information, individual differences may determine what people construe as forming jealousy-provoking threats (Guerrero, 1998), and thus their responses. In three studies, we test whether associations between EA and jealousy reactions persist after mood/neuroticism and attachment anxiety are considered. This has particular importance in the context of romantic threats, given the associations of neuroticism, negative affect, and attachment anxiety, with worry (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006), distrust of romantic partners (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), and jealousy (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997), respectively.

1.3. The present research

Several kinds of jealousy-provoking scenarios can be imagined. Unambiguous jealousy threats (comparable to reactive jealousy) would involve a clear romantic rival (e.g., an ex-lover of one’s partner expressing renewed interest in one’s partner). Ambiguous jealousy threats (akin to suspicious jealousy) would be interpretable as threatening or neutral (e.g., an unknown person contacting one’s partner, asking to ‘hang out’). Neutral scenarios are employed as a control group.

There are several ways that EA might influence reactions to such scenarios. First, by the emotion-amplifying hypothesis (e.g. Gold & Wegner, 1995; Hayes et al., 1996), EA should exaggerate reactions as situations become more emotionally provocative (Fig. 1). EA would have no power to predict distress in the control condition, slight influence under mild threat, and powerful influence under unambiguous threat. However, by the logic of the interchangeability hypothesis, EA functions as an affect/mood measure. Thus, EA should have homogeneous, additive effects across the conditions, predicting emotional agitation regardless of the situation, but eliminated as a predictor when mood is covaried (Fig. 2).

Therefore, both hypotheses suggest that EA will predict exaggerated reactions for individuals considering an imaginary conflict with a romantic partner. By the interchangeability hypothesis, EA’s effects on the imagined vignettes should be invariant across condition type (a main effect), and eliminated when (pre-vignette) affective variables are included as covariates. However, by the emotion-amplifying hypothesis, EA should interact with the vignette conditions such that

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1 Gámez et al. did not control for negative affect. We would suggest that negative affect’s significant correlation with the MEAQ, and relevance to the outcome variables (both in Gámez et al.’s research, and in our present research), makes it a worthy candidate for covariation.

2 For example, this experiment used two items to reflect ‘feelings of belonging’. Comparing the belongingness items to, for example, Malone, Pillow, and Osman’s (2012) validated, two-factor General Belongingness Scale, it seems hard to believe that two items can suffice as a valid substitute.

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3 Furthermore, jealousy has particular importance to our sample of college-age individuals, as young adults tend to experience more romantic jealousy (Harris, 2003). Second, EA is conceptualized as a broad trait that invokes complex emotions. If our context provoked only a narrow range of emotions, this might have limited EA’s ability to influence it. Jealousy is a multi-faceted emotional experience, involving elements of hurt, anger, and shame (Miller, 2012); thus, it matches EA’s broad scope.
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