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Relationships between worry, obsessive–compulsive symptoms and meta-cognitive beliefs

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Abstract

The present study had two principal aims. First, the overlap between the revised Padua Inventory (PI-WSUR) a measure of obsessive–compulsive symptoms (Burns et al., 1996) and worry was assessed. Second, the relationship between meta-cognitive beliefs, proneness to pathological worry and obsessive–compulsive symptoms was explored when controlling for the interdependency of worry and obsessive–compulsive measures. The results indicate that whilst the PI-WSUR shows reduced overlap with the Penn State Worry Questionnaire, there are still problematic levels of overlap with a more content-based measure of worry. Results of multiple regression analyses demonstrated that specific sets of meta-cognitive beliefs were associated with worry proneness and obsessive–compulsive symptoms. The present data are consistent with recent formulations of generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive–compulsive disorder. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Worry and obsessions are two types of intrusive cognitive phenomena associated with significant distress. They are characteristic features of particular emotional disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD). Worry and obsessions are also normally occurring phenomena (e.g. Rachman and de Silva, 1978; Salkovskis and Harrison, 1984; Wells and Morrison, 1994) and nonclinical samples can provide an adequate analogue for research on OCD (e.g. Burns et al., 1995).

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Several self-report instruments have been developed to assess worry. These include the Anxious Thoughts Inventory (AnTI; Wells, 1994b), the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ; Meyer et al., 1990) and the Worry Domains Questionnaire (WDQ; Tallis et al., 1992). An instrument that is gaining popularity in the measurement of obsessive–compulsive (O–C) symptoms is the Padua Inventory (PI; Sanavio, 1988). However, it has been noted that measures of worry and obsessions present a number of limitations to researchers wishing to distinguish between worry and obsessions and wishing to explore the differences between these types of ideational events (e.g. Freeston et al., 1994; Burns et al., 1996). To facilitate research, self-report instruments that reliably distinguish between worry and obsessions are required. The nature of the common variance in existing measures should be determined for purposes of refinement of psychometric measurement and for the development of theories of worry and obsessions.

Worry and obsessions share a number of features (Turner et al., 1992; Wells and Morrison, 1994; Clark and Claybourn, 1997). However, there are a number of differences. In a comparison of normal worries and normal obsessions, Wells and Morrison (1994) demonstrated that worries tended to be more verbal, realistic and voluntary and were associated with ratings of a greater compulsion to act than obsessions. Despite these differences, considerable similarity existed. For example, worry and obsessions did not differ in intrusiveness, controllability, dismissability, the extent to which they were resisted and how distracting or distressing the thoughts were. A possible difference between worry and obsessions which remains to be explored concerns the functional significance of these types of thoughts. Worry has been viewed as avoidance (Borkovec and Inz, 1991), as a form of problem-solving (Davey, 1994) and as a coping activity (Wells, 1994a, 1995), whilst no functional significance appears to have been assigned to obsessions.

One of the differentiating characteristics between worry and obsessions that has been used to improve the distinguishability of these phenomena is thought content (APA, 1994; Burns et al., 1996). In particular, worries are considered to consist of apprehensive expectation about real-life events such as finances, relations and work (APA, 1994). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV; APA, 1994, p. 435), “Several features distinguish the excessive worry of Generalized Anxiety Disorder from the obsessional thoughts of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Obsessional thoughts are not simply excessive worries about everyday or real-life problems, but rather are ego-dystonic intrusions that often take the form of urges, impulses and images in addition to thoughts”. In summary, worry and obsessions are currently distinguished on the basis of content. The content of obsessions is considered to be *ego-dystonic*, that is to say, it is viewed as alien or inappropriate by the individual. Typical obsessions concern sexual, aggressive and contamination themes that are out of character. However, the content distinction is not free from difficulties. In particular, some obsessional symptoms such as contamination fears are not necessarily ego-dystonic and are likely to overlap with worry themes such as those concerning health. Moreover, a distinction of obsessional phenomena purely in terms of their ego-dystonicity could lead to the neglect of other idiosyncratic features that could reliably differentiate obsessions from worry.

On the basis of possible content differences, Burns et al. (1996) set out to revise the Padua Inventory (PI) and reduce its overlap with worry. A problem with the initial PI was that items could be answered with reference to either worry or obsessions (e.g. “when doubts and worries

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