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The convergent validity of the Phobia Origins Questionnaire (POQ): a review of the evidence

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Abstract

The Phobic Origins Questionnaire (POQ) [Öst, L.-G. & Hugdahl, K. (1981). Acquisition of phobias and anxiety response patterns in clinical patients. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 19, 439–447.] is the most commonly cited instrument for determining the origins of phobic anxiety and data obtained using this instrument strongly support the role of conditioning in the acquisition of fear reactions. The construct validity of the POQ in assessing episodes of conditioning has been questioned [e.g. Menzies, R. G. & Clarke, J. C. (1994). Retrospective studies of the origins of phobias: a review. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, 7, 305–318.] This paper examined the convergent validity of the POQ by comparing origins' classifications based on the POQ to classifications based on alternative instruments. The convergent validity of the POQ was found to be extremely poor. The POQ was consistently associated with a much greater likelihood of classifying the origin of fear reactions as due to direct conditioning episodes than was found using alternative instruments. The findings question the usefulness of the POQ in examining the origins of phobic anxiety. © 1998 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In several reports, a variety of authors have raised doubts about the validity of origins classifications based on the Öst and Hugdahl (1981) Phobic Origins Questionnaire (POQ; Marks, 1987; Mattick, 1987; Menzies and Clarke, 1993a,b, 1994, 1995a; Jones and Menzies, 1995; Kirkby et al., 1995; Withers and Deane, 1995). Menzies and Clarke (1994) described a series of problems associated with the POQ. Firstly, the POQ is criticized for its use of

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insufficient categories for classification. The POQ only allows for five onset categories, namely either classical conditioning, modelling, information, a combination of classical, modelling and/or information and lastly, no recall. Clearly, these categories do not recognize the possibility of a non-associative onset and make the recording of a form of associative learning at onset very likely. Secondly, the POQ is criticized for using an inadequate definition of direct conditioning which does not require the specification of an independent unconditioned stimulus (UCS) in the original traumatic pairing and for failing to establish the affective neutrality of the conditioned stimulus (CS) prior to a supposed conditioning event. Thirdly, the POQ is criticized for its lack of demonstrated construct or convergent validity. On the basis of these problems a number of authors (e.g. Menzies and Clarke, 1994; Kirkby et al., 1995) have suggested that the heavy reliance on the POQ in reports concerning the origins of phobias may have led to a systematic overestimate of the frequency of direct conditioning in phobia acquisition.

Despite this, the POQ continues to be widely used and cited in support of associative-learning models of fear acquisition. Recently, for example, Merckelbach et al. (1996a,b), p. 351), in discussing previous retrospective research on the origins of phobias, state that “direct conditioning-like experiences seem to be the predominant mode in phobia acquisition”. While such a conclusion may seem warranted on the basis of studies using the POQ, it may be inconsistent with the findings of other studies. The present paper examines the validity of POQ-based classifications, by comparing them to origins classifications obtained using alternative instruments. This is done in three brief sections. First, retrospective studies that have used both the POQ and a second, alternative measure for origins classifications on a single phobic sample are examined. Second, phobias for which both POQ data and alternative origins data exist from different samples are reviewed. Finally, the origins of phobic types in which either POQ-data or data based on an alternative instrument exist are discussed.

2. Retrospective-studies using the POQ and an alternative origins measure

Studies employing multiple retrospective measures to assess the origins of a single sample of phobic subjects allow the most powerful evaluation of the measures used. The convergent-validity of the POQ can be assessed by examining the extent to which classifications on the instrument relate to classifications based on alternative origins instruments in a single sample, particularly if the alternative instruments have themselves been previously validated. By administering multiple instruments to a single sample, differences in the data obtained cannot be due to sample differences.

In two studies to date, classifications from the POQ have been compared to an alternative origins measure. Table 1 presents the major findings from these reports. In both studies, the second measure was the Menzies and Clarke (1993a) Origins Questionnaire (OQ), an instrument whose interrater reliability and convergent validity have been established. For example, Menzies and Clarke (1995b) report agreement between independent raters on 98% of classifications made on a sample of acrophobics. In the same study, the convergent validity of the OQ was 95%, when classifications to onset categories based on the OQ were compared to classifications based on a non-structured clinical interview. The major difference between the

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