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Mediating effects of rumination and worry on the links between neuroticism, anxiety and depression

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Abstract

The present study further examined the relations between neuroticism, rumination, and worry, on the one hand, and anxiety and depression, on the other hand, in a sample of 73 undergraduate students. The results indicated that there were significant correlations among neuroticism, rumination, and worry. Further, neuroticism, rumination, and worry were all positively linked to both anxiety and depression. Finally, support was found for a mediational model in which neuroticism was associated with the cognitive factors of worry and rumination, which in turn were related to anxiety and depression. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Recurrent, negative thoughts are an important feature of anxiety and depressive disorders. In anxiety, these thoughts may take the form of worry, which can be defined as apprehensive expectation of possible negative outcomes in future events (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983). In depression, such negative thinking is labelled as rumination, which can be characterized as pondering about the depressive symptoms, as well as the causes and consequences of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Obviously, worry bears strong resemblance to the construct of rumination as both constructs can be described as a cognitive concomitant of psychopathology that has to do with unproductive, repetitive thoughts.

Most researchers have exclusively related rumination to depression and worry to anxiety, although there is evidence to suggest that worry also occurs in depression (Starcevic, 1995) and that rumination is involved in anxiety (Blagden & Craske, 1996). Only a handful of studies have made an attempt to systematically explore the links between rumination and worry, on the one hand, and anxiety and depression, on the other hand. In a first study, Segerstrom, Tsao, Alden, and Craske (2000) reported substantial correlations between rumination and worry, and this appeared true for clinical and non-clinical subjects. Furthermore, using structural equations modeling, these authors demonstrated that rumination and worry both loaded on one and the same latent variable, labelled as ‘repetitive thought’, which in turn was significantly linked to both depression and anxiety. A second study was carried out by Fresco, Frankel, Mennin, Turk, and Heimberg (2002) who asked a large sample of undergraduate students to complete self-report scales of rumination, worry, anxiety, and depression. Results of a common factor analysis on rumination and worry items revealed separate factors for rumination and worry. In addition, it was found that rumination and worry were highly correlated with each other and demonstrated equally strong relationships to both anxiety and depression. In a third study, Muris, Roelofs, Meesters, and Boomsma (2004) examined relations among rumination, worry, anxiety and depression symptoms in a sample of 337 non-clinical adolescents. Results showed that rumination and worry were substantially correlated. Further, a factor analysis showed that both constructs were nevertheless distinct as rumination and worry items loaded on separate factors. Interestingly, both rumination and worry correlated more substantially with anxiety symptoms than with depression symptoms. Finally, worry emerged as a unique predictor of anxiety symptoms, even when controlling for rumination. In contrast, when controlling for worry, rumination no longer accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in depression symptoms.

Although there is some factor analytic evidence indicating that worry and rumination have distinct features (Fresco et al., 2002; Muris et al., 2004), the findings of these studies seem to justify the conclusion that worry and rumination are closely related cognitive constructs. Some authors have even reached the conclusion that worry and rumination are both manifestations of the dispositional vulnerability factor of neuroticism, which is believed to reflect the general predisposition to develop psychopathological symptoms such as anxiety and depression (e.g., Segerstrom et al., 2000). There is accumulating evidence demonstrating that worry and rumination are indeed substantially linked to neuroticism (e.g., Davey & Tallis, 1994; Keogh, French, & Reidy, 1998; Lam, Smith, Checkley, Rijdsdijk, & Sham, 2003; Roberts, Gilboa, & Gotlib, 1998).

Taken together, available research strongly suggests a mediational model in which neuroticism is associated with the cognitive factors of worry and rumination, which in turn are related to

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