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## Self-worth contingencies and obsessionality: A promising approach to vulnerability?

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### ABSTRACT

Cognitive behavioral theories (CBT) posit deficiencies in selfhood processes as possible vulnerability factors for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This paper presents two psychometric studies on the development of the Obsessional Concerns and Self Questionnaire (OCSQ), a measure of failure to attain self-worth in personal domains relevant to obsessionality. In the first study based on 563 community Spaniards, principal factor analysis of an 80 item pool resulted in a three factor solution and a final 35 item version (OCSQ-r). In the second study self-worth and symptom measures were administered to 152 Spanish, 142 Argentinean and 112 Canadian nonclinical samples. Group comparisons revealed few differences on the OCSQ-r subscales. Partial correlations indicated that the OCSQ-r had a significantly closer relationship with OCD symptoms and OC personality disorder than anxious or depressive symptoms. Hierarchical regression analysis further supported the convergent validity of the OCSQ-r by showing that measures of general self-worth contingencies and obsessionality but not worry were significant unique predictors of the OCSQ-r.

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### 1. Introduction

Cognitive-behavioral theories (CBT) of obsessive compulsive-disorder (OCD) consider obsessions the extreme variant of normal unwanted intrusive thoughts (UIT) and emphasize faulty appraisals as the process by which intrusive thoughts escalate into clinical obsessions in vulnerable individuals (Clark, 2004; Rachman, 1998; Salkovskis, 1985). While considerable research has elucidated the cognitive basis of OCD, progress on cognitive vulnerability has lagged far behind (Clark & Beck, 2010). As a result little is known about potential individual difference variables that might predispose one to generate exaggerated faulty appraisals when having UIT about dirt/contamination, harm/aggression toward others, doubt, sex, religion, hoarding, and the like.

A core tenet of CBT models is that OCD-vulnerable individuals are more likely to misinterpret unwanted intrusions that have personal meaning or significance (Purdon & Clark, 1999; Rachman, 1998; Salkovskis, 1985). By invoking the notion of “personal significance” it is recognized that the individual’s self-view is a

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key determinant of how UITs are evaluated. Thus OCD vulnerable individuals may be more likely to misinterpret as personally meaningful a UIT that is contrary to, or threatens, cherished standards, values or ideals involved in self-evaluation (Clark, 2004; Rachman, 1998).

Despite involvement of the self in CBT conceptualizations of the origins of obsessions, the empirical research on this topic is meager. Ferrier and Brewin (2005) reported that OCD patients’ feared self was composed of bad and immoral trait descriptors. In another study OCD patients reported that their most disturbing obsession contradicted valued aspects of the self significantly more than their least distressing obsession (Rowa, Purdon, Summerfeldt, & Antony, 2005).

Doron and Kyrios (2005) proposed the most elaborated conceptualization of selfhood processes in OCD. They contend that obsessions are more likely to arise in highly valued self-domains in which an individual feels incompetent. In a nonclinical sample, obsessional symptoms and beliefs were related to heightened sensitivity in morality, job and scholastic competence (Doron, Kyrios, & Moulding, 2007), and in an OCD study elevated sensitivity in moral domains was related to OC symptoms (Doron, Moulding, Kyrios, & Nedeljkovic, 2008). These data suggest that overvaluing selfhood domains in which one perceives incompetence may be related to the development of obsessional problems. In a recent experiment, Doron, Sar-El, and Mikulincer (2012)

again found a relationship between morality sensitivity and OCD contamination symptoms. Participants who received bogus feedback characterizing their self as immoral exhibited significantly more contamination-related behavioral responses than individuals who received neutral feedback.

While the previous studies focused on self-concept, practically no research has investigated the role of self-evaluation in OCD, despite a robust research linking low self-esteem to current psychopathology (Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel, & Biesheuvel, 2010; Zeigler-Hill, 2011). In the few studies to examine this question, individuals with OCD had lower global self-esteem than a nonclinical comparison group (Ehnholt, Salkovskis, & Rimes, 1999) and very low self-image (Wu, Clark, & Watson, 2006). However differences in trait self-esteem fails to capture the nuances in self-evaluation that may be associated with more specific life domains relevant to OCD, such as the need to maintain cleanliness, safety, order, certainty, and self-control. As well, fluctuations and reactivity of self-esteem to daily stressors may be more predictive of psychopathological episodes than level of trait self-esteem (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Thus obsession-prone individuals may be more likely to make exaggerated threat appraisals of UITs associated with specific OCD-relevant life domains than intrusions associated with less valued domains or a broad index of self-esteem. For example would individuals who evaluate themselves as being very responsible and meticulous be more likely to misinterpret doubting UITs as highly significant personal threats than a person who did not value meticulousness? Are vulnerable individuals more likely to misinterpret UIT that are ego-dystonic, that is, thoughts that challenge core values that are the basis of one's self-evaluation?

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) proposed a theoretical perspective on self-worth that offers a promising framework for investigating the role of self-evaluative processes in vulnerability to obsessions. A central tenet of their proposal is that global self-esteem ("I am a valued person") is contingent on perceived success or failure in domain-specific self-evaluations. They define contingency of self-worth as a "...category of outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem, so that the person's view of his or her value or worth depends on perceived successes or failures or adherence to self-standards in that domain" (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001, p. 594). The Contingencies of Self-worth Scale (CSW) was developed to evaluate contingent self-evaluation in seven general life domains (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvette, 2003). Studies indicate that CSW scores, especially those related to external contingencies like appearance, are associated with psychopathological symptom measures (Sargent, Crocker, & Luhtanen, 2006), but also may be sensitive to cultural differences (Cheng & Kwan, 2008).

The present studies provide preliminary findings using a modified self-worth contingency perspective to explore the relationship between self-evaluative processes and obsessional symptomatology. In this conceptualization the pathogenic influence of self-worth contingency is evident as a tendency to misinterpret as a personally significant threat unwanted ego-dystonic UIT about dirt/contamination, doubt, loss of control over impulses, etc. because the intrusions represent a perceived violation or failure to maintain standards in one or more obsession-relevant self-evaluative domains. In order to evaluate this formulation it was first necessary to construct a self-report measure that captures perceived success or failure in attaining self-worth in OC-relevant life domains (i.e., cleanliness, order/symmetry, doubt, harm/injury, religion/morality/sex, etc.). The CSW cannot be used for this purpose because it assesses perceived self-worth in more generic life domains.

Two psychometric studies were conducted to address the following questions. Based on the CSW, can a more specific pool

of self-evaluative items be generated that map more directly onto the primary concerns represented in OCD? Is the new measure of contingent self-worth disorder-specific to OCD symptoms or does it tap into a more general distress dimension? Does the self-report measure suffer from cultural biases or does it generalize across different cultural groups?

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

A group of 563 Spaniards (63.9% women) drawn from the community with a mean age of 29.47 years ( $SD=12.27$ ). Most (60.7%) had a university-level education.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

*Obsessional Concerns and Self Questionnaire (OCSQ)*. Items written for the OCSQ were modeled after the Contingencies of Self-worth Scale and reflect the extent that respondents consider OC content domains relevant to their self-worth. The preliminary version of the OCSQ contained 80 items tapping into seven OC relevant domains: cleanliness, accuracy, morality, religion, certainty, hoarding, and gentleness toward others. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1='strongly agree' to 7='strongly disagree'. The items were initially evaluated for comprehensibility by 10 Canadian doctoral students in clinical psychology and a few items were rewritten. The item pool was then translated and back-translated into Spanish by the first and third authors, and its comprehensibility evaluated by 5 doctoral-level experts in OCD and 15-community participants.

The 80-item OCSQ was then administered to the 563 Spanish sample. Item analysis resulted in the exclusion of 24 items that evidenced low item variance, poor item-total correlations, or whose removal improved the scale's alpha coefficient. A principal component factor analysis with promax rotation, conducted on the remaining 56 items, resulted in a final 39 item version. Seventeen items were deleted because they failed to load on any factor ( $\leq .30$ ) or had complex loadings on several factors ( $\geq .30$ ).

#### 2.1.3. Procedure

Recruitment of the sample was conducted by advanced psychology students (66 students) who obtained course credit for their recruitment efforts. A training seminar was provided and students individually administered the Spanish version of the questionnaire to at least eight community volunteers. Research participants did not receive any compensation for completing the questionnaire. All the participants provided written informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire. A subsample of the Spanish participants ( $n=211$ ) were retested with the OCSQ within 7–15 day ( $M=9.79$ ;  $SD=2.90$  day) to evaluate test-retest reliability.

### 2.2. Results and discussion

In order to determine the optimal number of factors to retain in the exploratory factor analysis, principal components parallel analysis was conducted on the total sample ( $N=563$ ) using SPSS to generate 100 random data sets of the 39-item OCSQ (Hayton, Allen, & Scarpello, 2004). The mean and 95th percentile of all eigenvalues from the generated random data sets were compared to the actual eigenvalues from a PCA conducted on the real data set. Only the first three actual eigenvalues (i.e., 9.71, 2.50, 1.54) were greater than the mean generated eigenvalues (i.e., 1.53, 1.48, 1.43). This indicated that three factors were the optimal number to retain in the factor analysis.

A principal axis factor analysis with promax rotation constrained to three factors was subsequently conducted on the 39-item OCSQ. Four items were deleted because they obtained similar loadings across different factors. A new principal axis factor analysis with promax rotation and constrained to three factors was conducted on the 35-item OCSQ. The 3-factor solution had a simple structure and the factors were easily interpretable. This solution explained 35.75% of the total variance and factors were labeled: Maintain Moral Principles (moral, 11 items), Responsibility Toward Others (responsibility, 13 items), and Values Collecting or Hoarding (hoarding, 11 items). The factor intercorrelations ranged from .59 (responsibility—hoarding) to .44 (moral—hoarding). The OCSQ-Total scale and subscales had acceptable Cronbach alpha values (Total=.92; Moral=.87; Responsibility=.84; Hoarding=.84) and high test-retest reliability ( $n=211$ ; Total=.96; Moral=.93; Responsibility=.91; Hoarding=.91).

The initial 80 item pool was generated that represented seven primary OC content domains (i.e., contamination, doubts/checking, aggression/harm, religion/morality, sex, order/symmetry, hoarding). This was eventually reduced to 35 items after completing basic item analysis and factor analysis. Exploratory principal

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