



Fear of guilt from behaving irresponsibly in obsessive–compulsive disorder

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Abstract

Previous cognitive models of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) propose that inflated responsibility plays a key role in the maintenance of symptoms (Behav.Res.Ther. 28 (1985) 571). In this manuscript, we propose that this thesis may be improved by emphasizing that instead, OCD may be characterized by a fear of guilt that would result from behaving irresponsibly and/or from not behaving responsibly. We believe that this concept provides a better explanation for the anxious and fearful nature of OCD than do more traditional conceptualizations of inflated responsibility. We support this idea with empirical evidence and propose that OCD symptoms are consistent with patients acting in a *prudential mode* because of their fears of guilt.

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1. Introduction

The thesis that inflated responsibility plays a crucial role in obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) is widely accepted (Salkovskis, 1985, 1996; Salkovskis & Forrester, 2002; Rachman, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2002; Ladouceur, Leger, Rheaume, & Dube, 1996; Freeston, Ladouceur, Gagnon, & Thibodeau, 1993).

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Excessive or inflated responsibility was defined as

“The belief that one has *power which is pivotal* to bring about or prevent subjectively crucial *negative outcomes*. These outcomes are perceived as *essential to prevent*. They may be actual, that is having consequences in the real world, and/or at a moral level” (Salkovskis & Forrester, 2002).

In this paper, however, it is argued that this definition of responsibility is not wholly adequate for defining the mental state regulating obsessive behaviour.

It is instead suggested that obsessive activity is regulated by the fear of behaving irresponsibly. In our view the obsessive individual is actually more afraid his/her own behaviour will not match up to his/her sense of duty rather than any negative event occurring (Mancini, 2001).

The article is divided into two parts.

In part one, arguments are directed towards demonstrating that (1) the characteristics that according to Salkovskis and Forrester (2002) are necessary and sufficient to define the mental state of the subject who feels responsible are actually neither necessary nor sufficient. We shall point out what, in our view, are the necessary and sufficient ingredients for an individual to feel responsible; (2) responsibility may be inflated also by modulating different ingredients than those mentioned in Salkovskis and Forrester’s definition; and (3) Salkovskis and Forrester’s definition does not account for the anxiety characterizing the obsessive experience, which can instead be explained in terms of the fear of not living up to one’s duties.

In part two we shall present some experimental evidence to support our thesis, namely that the mental state regulating obsessive activity is the fear of behaving irresponsibly.

2. The current definition of inflated responsibility

According to the definition given by Salkovskis and Forrester (2002), inflated responsibility could be considered as a mental state composed of the following ingredients: (1) the threat of a negative outcome, which may be either a *manifest* threat (e.g. a car accident) or a *moral* threat (e.g. “Having unacceptable thoughts means that I am a bad person”) (Ladouceur et al., 1996); (2) the prevention of a negative outcome as the primary goal; and (3) the belief in one’s personal power to prevent the negative outcome (i.e. being endowed with a pivotal power).

Here, the mental state of the person who perceives inflated responsibility is assumed to differ from a typical sense of responsibility in two quantitative respects. That is, that the goal of preventing the negative outcome is perceived to be of the utmost importance, and that the belief in having the power to prevent the negative outcome is greatly amplified. Rhéaume Ladouceur, Freeston, and Letarte (1995) have suggested that the amount of personal influence perceived by a subject affects the amount of perceived responsibility to a greater extent than the likelihood and harmfulness that has been ascribed to the negative outcome by the subject.

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