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Borderline personality features as a potential moderator of the effect of anger and depressive rumination on shame, self-blame, and self-forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: Recent studies have suggested that types of rumination differ on how they impact psychopathology. Few research studies, however, have compared the two types of rumination. The primary aim of this research was to examine the effects of anger rumination and depressive rumination on factors related to self-conscious experiences (shame, self-blame, self-forgiveness) and negative affect among individuals with varying levels of borderline personality disorder (BPD) features. **Methods:** Participants ($N = 120$), screened for BPD features, were randomly assigned to an anger or depressive mood induction followed by a rumination induction. Participants then completed self-report measures of emotional state and self-conscious experiences.

Results: In both anger and depressive rumination conditions, participants reported significantly increased negative affect and decreased positive affect relative to their baseline measurements. Participants with elevated levels of BP features reported higher levels of self-blame and shame. In the low-BPD group, self-blame levels were higher following depressive rumination compared to anger rumination.

Limitations: Due to resource constraints this study lacked a control condition involving no rumination. The range of BPD features was also restricted due to the use of a non-clinical sample thereby limiting the ability to examine BPD features as a moderator.

Conclusions: Despite the limitations, the current study is one of few investigations comparing the differential effects of induced anger rumination and depressive rumination on affect and self-conscious experiences. This study also addresses an important gap in literature on the mechanisms by which rumination influences negative affect.

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1. Introduction

Rumination is a cognitive style involving repetitive fixation on an individual's own problems, thoughts, emotions, actions, or past events (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Although sometimes perceived as an effective problem solving or coping strategy (Liverant, Kamholz, Solan, & Brown, 2011; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Watkins & Baracaia, 2001), rumination consistently predicts, maintains, and exacerbates negative mood along with increasing vulnerability to depressive affect (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Rumination has also been found to

sustain the processing of negative emotions (McLaughlin, Borkovec, & Sibrava, 2007), making it difficult for individuals to disengage from negative emotional material (LeMoult, Joormann, & Arditte, 2011).

As rumination often involves intense self-focus, such as analyzing events or lamenting actions, it may be strongly linked with self-conscious emotions, such as shame, and experiences, such as self-blame and self-forgiveness. Past research has shown that rumination is associated with heightened self-criticism and self-blame (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008) as well as the amplification of shame (Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006). Moreover, past studies have suggested a potential looping effect where rumination deepens global, self-deprecatory thinking, and views of oneself as blameworthy which then leads to further rumination (Orth et al., 2006; Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, & Felton, 2008). Finally, self-forgiveness, the ability to forgive and accept oneself, especially

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after experiences of self-blame and shame, has been linked to decreases in negative affect (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). Although theory and correlational evidence suggest that rumination heightens self-conscious experiences (e.g., shame, self-blame, self-forgiveness), there are few studies that have manipulated and directly investigated the effects of rumination on these processes.

Beyond understanding the effects of rumination on self-conscious experiences, it is also important to understand the factors that might moderate these effects. One potential moderator includes borderline personality disorder (BPD) features. Increased vulnerability to negative emotions (see Rosenthal et al., 2008 for a review), and models of BPD have implicated rumination as a key mechanism maintaining negative emotions and precipitating harmful behaviors (Selby & Joiner, 2009; 2013). The Emotional Cascade Model of BPD, for example, suggests that individuals with BPD are prone to rumination, which intensifies aversive emotions and precipitates further rumination, creating a positive feedback loop leading to overwhelming, intolerable emotions (Selby & Joiner, 2009). Consistent with this model, individuals with BPD have shown greater increases in negative affect following rumination when compared to their counterparts without BPD (Selby, Anestis, Bender, & Joiner, 2009). Individuals with BPD are also particularly vulnerable to self-conscious experiences (Crowe, 2004; Gratz, Rosenthal, Tull, Lejuez, & Gunderson, 2010; Rusch et al., 2007). Thus, the positive feedback loop between rumination and self-conscious experiences may be amplified by presence of BPD features.

Another potential moderator may include the type of emotional experience on which an individual ruminates. The focus in this study is on rumination on anger-provoking versus depressive events. Depressive rumination is the fixation on depressive experiences and the implications of these experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Anger rumination is the unintentional and recurrent cognitive processing of experiences of anger and the implications of these experiences (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001). There has been evidence indicating that there may be differences in how depressive and anger rumination influence affect. Previous research has found that both anger and depressive rumination contribute to depression and shame (Gilbert, Cheung, Irons, & McEwan, 2005). Anger difficulties comprise a core symptom of BPD (Gardner, Leibenluft, O'Leary, & Cowdry, 1991; Peters, Geiger, Smart, & Baer, 2013; Sauer-Zavala, Geiger, & Baer, 2013), and those with BPD have shown heightened anger and retaliatory behavior in laboratory paradigms (e.g., Chapman, Walters, & Dixon Gordon, 2012; Dougherty, Bjork, Huckabee, Moeller, & Swann, 1999). Moreover, anger rumination has been found to be associated with lower distress tolerance (Sauer & Baer, 2012), which is characteristic of individuals with BPD.

It is possible that anger and depressive rumination may have differential effects on individuals with various levels of BPD features. Past research has found a mediating effect of anger and anger rumination on the relationship between shame vulnerability and BPD features and suggested that individuals may engage in anger rumination to avoid feelings of shame (Peters et al., 2013). It is also possible that anger rumination, specifically when anger is directed at the self, may lead to greater increases in shame compared to depressive rumination. Additionally, recent studies have found anger rumination to be associated with BPD features above and beyond depressive rumination (Baer & Sauer, 2011) and also strongly associated with depressive symptoms (Besharat, Nia, & Farahani, 2013). Research comparing anger and depressive rumination, however, has been limited by the use of descriptive or correlational designs. Moreover, few studies have directly

compared anger and depressive rumination and even fewer studies have examined the effect of rumination on self-blame; thus, it remains unclear how the two types of rumination impact self-conscious experiences.

The primary aim of the present study was to examine the effects of rumination on negative affect, shame, self-blame, and self-forgiveness, as well as determine whether BPD features or type of rumination moderate these effects. Anger and depressive rumination was induced in the laboratory among university students with varying degrees of BPD features. Previous studies have demonstrated a range of BPD features in university students, and similar behavioral patterns and functional impairments have been shown among high-BPD university students and clinical populations with a BPD diagnosis (Chapman, Dixon-Gordon, Layden, & Walters, 2010; Dixon-Gordon, Chapman, Lovasz, & Walters, 2011; Trull, 1995). We focused specifically on rumination on interpersonal interactions, given previous findings that interpersonal dysfunction and distress are core problems associated with BPD features (Chapman et al., 2012; Stepp, Hallquist, Morse, & Pilkonis, 2011). Hypothesis 1 was that elevated BPD features will lead to increased negative affect and decreased positive affect. Hypothesis 2 was that individuals with elevated levels of BPD features would demonstrate greater self-blame and shame, and less self-forgiveness compared to their counterparts with less BPD features. Given recent research findings that anger rumination is more strongly associated with shame vulnerability and BPD features compared to depressive rumination (Baer & Sauer, 2011; Peters et al., 2013), Hypothesis 3a was individuals who engage in anger rumination would have greater increases in shame compared with those who engaged in depressive rumination and Hypothesis 3b that the impact of rumination condition on shame would be moderated by BPD features, with the effects of condition being stronger among the low-BPD participants. We also examined the effect of anger versus depressive rumination on self-blame, self-forgiveness, and changes negative affect, although these analyses were more exploratory, as there is limited theory and research to inform hypotheses regarding the possible differential effects of types of rumination on these outcomes. It is, however, possible that individuals with elevated levels of BPD features will have greater changes in negative affect, more self-blame and less self-forgiveness regardless of condition indicating that type of rumination is not as salient a variable amongst individuals with high BPD features due to already heightened vulnerability towards negative affect and self-conscious experiences (Crowe, 2004; Gratz et al., 2010; Rosenthal et al., 2008; Rusch et al., 2007). Given the possibility that people in the depressive or anger condition may recall events related to emotions relevant to the other condition, a supplementary aim of this research was to examine the relationship between the emotional content of the scenarios recalled and our primary dependent variables.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and recruitment

University students ($N = 120$; 77% female) between the ages of 18 and 43 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.88$, $SD = 3.73$) were recruited through the psychology subject pool and a mass email directed at all psychology students. Participants were given the choice to be compensated with course credit or \$5 CDN.

2.1.1. Screening and assignment to groups

The Personality Assessment Inventory–Borderline Feature Scale (PAI-BOR; Morey, 1991), a self-report questionnaire assessing features associated with BPD, was used as the primary instrument to

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