Empirical research

Experiential avoidance and interpersonal problems: A moderated mediation model

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study employed a moderated mediation framework to examine whether negative expectations of interpersonal relationships explained the relationship between experiential avoidance and interpersonal problems. University students ($N=159$) completed measures of experiential avoidance, negative perceptions and expectations of interpersonal relationships (e.g., hostility, attachment anxiety), and interpersonal problems (e.g., coldness, social avoidance, dominating tendencies, and vindictiveness). Attachment anxiety explained the relationship between experiential avoidance and interpersonal problems involving coldness and social avoidance, with a stronger relationship at high levels of experiential avoidance. In addition, hostility explained the relationship between experiential avoidance and interpersonal problems involving dominant and vindictive tendencies. Moreover, experiential avoidance interacted with attachment anxiety and hostility to predict higher levels of interpersonal problems as evidenced by stronger indirect associations among participants reporting higher levels of experiential avoidance. Results of this pilot study provide a preliminary empirical model that integrates the literatures on experiential avoidance and interpersonal problems.

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal problems are frequently reported by individuals seeking psychotherapy and often become the focus of intervention, suggesting the need for more basic research evaluating cognitive processes that may underlie interpersonal problems. Behavior analytic, psychodynamic and other developmental theories acknowledge that interpersonal problems are multiply determined and that early attachments play a role in shaping the interpersonal repertoire and a host of other social, emotional, behavioral, physiological, and academic outcomes (Aviezer, Sagi, Resnick, & Gini, 2002; Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Bowlby, 1969; Frigerio et al., 2009; Horowitz, Rosenberg, & Bartholomew, 1993; O'Connor, 2011; Prather & Golden, 2009). Psychological flexibility theory implicates experiential avoidance, the tendency to negatively evaluate and limit contact with distressing subjective experiences, as a vulnerability for a range of impairments (Bond et al., 2011; Herbert, Gaudiano, & Forman, 2013; Levin, Hildebrandt, Lillis, & Hayes, 2012). Similarly, interpersonal theory

has identified that rigid attempts to avoid distress in social situations may contribute to interpersonal problems (Grosse Holtforth, Bents, Mauler, & Grawe, 2006; Sullivan, 1953; Thompson, 1999). The current study interprets interpersonal theory within a broader framework of psychological flexibility theory and tests the hypothesis that experiential avoidance may explain negative perceptions and expectations of interpersonal relationships that in turn contribute to common interpersonal problems (Grosse Holtforth, Bents, Mauler, & Grawe, 2006; Levin et al., 2012; Sullivan, 1953; Thompson, 1999).

1.1. Experiential avoidance as a generalized vulnerability for distress

Interpersonal theories of psychopathology can be interpreted within a broader framework of psychological flexibility theory (Levin et al., 2012) … a translational theory that bridges basic research and intervention (for a full description of psychological flexibility theory, see Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Herbert, Gaudiano, & Forman, 2013; Levin et al., 2012). Within psychological flexibility theory, experiential avoidance is conceptualized to disrupt the pursuit of personally held values and contributes to psychosocial distress (Bond et al., 2011). Experiential avoidance is defined as the tendency to negatively evaluate, escape and avoid aversive private experiences. Experiential avoidance may provide

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a broad umbrella for conceptualizing the avoidant functions of problematic interpersonal behaviors [and] interfere with the pursuit of meaningful, intimate and caring relationships (Grosse Holtforth et al., 2006). Experiential avoidance may be particularly problematic in interpersonal life when individuals avoid acknowledging the objective nature of maladaptive relationships and begin to view cognitive and emotional responses to those relationships as the problem (Kashdan, Morina, & Priebe, 2009). For example, individuals who deem their attachment anxiety as threatening may attempt to avoid such feelings by withdrawing from social situations and behaving in cold, impersonal ways. Similarly, individuals prone to hostile expectations regarding the intentions of others may behave in aggressive and dominating ways in an attempt to regulate feelings of vulnerability and reduce uncomfortable physiological arousal (Gardner & Moore, 2008).

Individuals prone to managing difficult emotions with experiential avoidance also report reduced ability to delay gratification, and this relationship is explained in part by heightened levels of depression and anger (Gerhart, Heath, Fitzgerald, & Hoerger, 2013). In the moment-to-moment progression of interpersonal interactions, individuals may behave impulsively to the extent that their choices are governed by short-term escape contingencies and are inconsistent with broader values of interpersonal intimacy, altruism, and cooperation. Thus, these individuals may desire and value interpersonal connection, but fail to interact effectively in the presence of difficult subjective experiences reducing their ability to engage in committed action (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). As experiential avoidance increases, behavioral flexibility decreases; thus the chain of avoidant coping, negative expectations and interpersonal problems may become more rigidly linked. Understanding the pathways by which experiential avoidance fosters interpersonal problems could, ultimately, inform studies in clinical settings aimed at ameliorating interpersonal deficits.

1.2. The Interpersonal Circumplex and the persistence of interpersonal problems

Interpersonal theory and the Interpersonal Circumplex can be a useful guide for parsimoniously summarizing interpersonal behaviors or response sets that tend to co-occur (Barkham, Hardy, & Startup, 1996) and are thought to result from experiential avoidance. Interpersonal theories conceptualize interpersonal problems as learned behaviors that fall along two intersecting dimensions of coldness versus warmth, and dominance versus submission (see Fig. 1; Barkham et al., 1996; Bowlby, 1969). On the first dimension, individuals prone to coldness tend to be disengaged from others, asocial, unfriendly and disagreeable, whereas individuals prone to warmth are more engaged, prosocial, and friendly. On the second dimension, individuals prone to dominance tend to be controlling and aggressive, whereas individuals prone to submissiveness tend to be meek and passive.

Excesses in dimensions of coldness vs. warmth and dominance vs. submission may interact to produce interpersonal behavioral problems such as coldness, social avoidance, vindictiveness, and dominating behavior (Barkham et al., 1996). Difficulties such as coldness and social avoidance may be accompanied by significant levels of withdrawal and avoidance of intimacy (Wright et al., 2012). Difficulties with vindictiveness and dominating behavior are associated with significant levels of impulsivity, hostility and grandiosity (Wright et al., 2012). These clusters of interpersonal problems can also be persistent, with evidence suggesting that vindictive, cold, and dominating behaviors may be particularly resistant to intervention (Horowitz et al., 1993).

There are several plausible explanations for the persistence of interpersonal problems as these behaviors may serve a variety of functions (Farmer & Nelson-Gray, 1999). Interpersonal problems
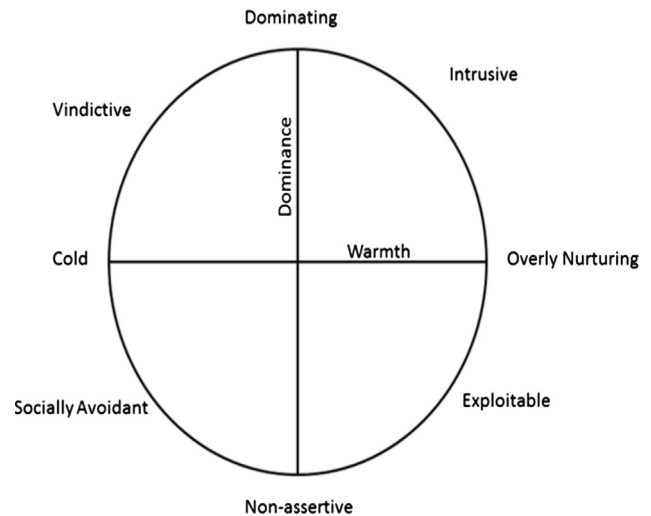

Fig. 1. The Interpersonal Circumplex.

are often intermingled with varied forms of subjective distress and the experiential avoidance of these varied forms of distress provide important hypotheses for understanding the functions that maintain these interpersonal behaviors (Farmer & Nelson-Gray, 1999). Social avoidance and withdrawal are linked to social anxiety, and aggressive behaviors tend to co-occur with angry emotions (Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990; Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Ineffective attachments may contribute to a sense of mistrust, attachment anxieties, and diminished perception of control (Bowlby, 1969; Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Mikulincer, 1998). These anxieties and expectations shaped in past relationships can be carried forward in the form of generalized anxiety regarding attachments or may be elicited by specific features of new relationships such as physical and behavioral similarities between past and present relationships (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). Individuals may view others as threatening, misinterpret vague, neutral and benign social cues as indications of a threat and acquire a repertoire of defensive or aggressive interpersonal behavior (Huessman, 1998). These expectancies may contribute to rule-governed behaviors that guide attention away from the moment-to-moment changes in relationship quality and seemingly reconfirm previously held beliefs about the self and others (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Wulfert, Greenway, Farkas, Hayes, & Dougher, 1994).

Interpersonal theory also maintains that behavioral problems may be directly maintained by the reactions of others (Horowitz et al., 1993). For instance, cold, withdrawn, and unfriendly reactions tend to evoke similar responses in others. These tit-for-tat interchanges can create positive feedback loops in which interpersonal coldness leads to longstanding detachment. Dominance and submission tend to evoke opposing reactions from others. Dominant behaviors may be reinforced by increased control, influence, and getting one's way. In contrast, submissive behaviors tend to invite additional domination from others. Although the loss of interpersonal connection and domination from others could be punishing in the long-term, problematic behaviors could be reinforced through escape and avoidance of short-term subjective distress (Grosse Holtforth et al., 2006).

1.3. Current study

The current pilot study interprets interpersonal theory of distress within psychological flexibility theory and evaluates the relationship between experiential avoidance, attachment anxiety, hostility, and interpersonal problems in a non-clinical sample.