



The functional assessment of maladaptive behaviors: A preliminary evaluation of binge eating and purging among women

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 June 2008

Received in revised form 11 May 2009

Accepted 12 May 2009

Keywords:

Functional assessment

Eating disorders

Bulimia

Psychological assessment

ABSTRACT

This study applied a functional approach to the study of bingeing and purging behaviors. Based on a four-function theoretical model of bingeing and purging, it was hypothesized that these behaviors are performed because of their intrapersonally reinforcing (e.g., emotion regulation) and/or interpersonally reinforcing (e.g., help-seeking, attention-getting behavior) properties. Participants were 298 adult females who had engaged in bingeing or purging in the last 3 months and who provided data via an online survey of these behaviors. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed support for a four-function model of bingeing and purging in which people use these behaviors for intrapersonal reinforcement functions and also for interpersonal reinforcement. Understanding the functions of binge eating and purging has direct implications for assessment and treatment of these behaviors.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to better understand why people engage in the maladaptive behaviors seen in many psychiatric disorders. Most research over the past several decades has taken a syndromal approach in which maladaptive behaviors are conceptualized as signs or symptoms of some underlying disease process. An alternative approach is to consider the function of maladaptive behaviors. That is, what purposes they serve in their immediate environment. From a functional perspective, maladaptive behaviors are not necessarily manifestations of an underlying disease, but instead are goal-directed behaviors performed to obtain some desired end. Because behaviors may serve different functions for different individuals, the ability to assess the functions of behavior has important implications for clinical assessment and treatment.

These different approaches to understanding maladaptive behaviors can be reconciled by the acknowledgment that not all psychiatric disorders are best conceptualized from a functional perspective. For instance, alcohol/substance use, self-injury, and eating disorders may be best understood using a functional perspective, while schizophrenia, autism, and mental retardation may be best understood from a syndromal/disease perspective (McHugh, 1992). Moreover, regarding the former, it may also be that different maladaptive behaviors (e.g., alcohol/substance use, self-injury, bingeing, and purging) are maintained by similar behavioral functions. For instance, each of these

behaviors could function as a means of escaping a negative emotional state or influencing the behavior of others in some way.

Prior research typically has tested functional models of different forms of maladaptive behaviors with measures specific to one form of psychopathology, such as self-injury, eating disorders, or alcohol or substance use (e.g., Carr, 1977; Heatherton and Baumeister, 1991; Iwata et al., 1994; Cooper et al., 1995; Sherwood et al., 2000; Wilson and Hayes, 2000; Jackson et al., 2003; Nock and Prinstein, 2004; Thombs, 2006). Given the considerable overlap of these behavior problems (Welch and Fairburn, 1996; Paul et al., 2002; Nock et al., 2006), research in this area may advance more efficiently if there were a common method for studying the functions across these behaviors. Such an advance also would allow researchers and clinicians to examine whether these different behaviors serve similar functions. The purpose of this study was to develop a method for measuring the functions of maladaptive behaviors that could be used across behavior problems.

Following prior research on the psychological functions of self-injury (Nock and Prinstein, 2004), alcohol use (Cox and Klinger, 1988; Cooper et al., 1995), and unhealthy eating patterns (Jackson et al., 2003), we proposed that binge eating and purging would be maintained via either negative or positive reinforcement processes, and that the contingencies maintaining these behaviors would be either automatic (i.e., intrapersonal) or social (i.e., interpersonal). In this model, *automatic-negative reinforcement* (ANR) refers to a process in which behavior is maintained by the removal of a negative affective state. In contrast, *automatic-positive reinforcement* (APR) refers to a process in which behavior is maintained by the consequent occurrence of a desired internal state. Engaging in a behavior for *social-negative reinforcement* (SNR) refers to doing so to avoid interactions with others or other social tasks. In contrast, the *social-positive*

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reinforcement (SPR) function focuses on getting attention from others or to communicate information to another.

Prior theoretical models of bingeing and purging behaviors are consistent with the four-function model proposed here (Heatherton and Baumeister, 1991; Polivy and Herman, 1999). Heatherton and Baumeister (1991) have proposed that bingeing functions to escape from negative self-awareness. According to this theory, some people, especially those who maintain high standards for themselves, find it aversive to be aware of themselves and their shortcomings and so binge to avoid the negative feelings that may arise from this awareness (Heatherton et al., 1991; Heatherton et al., 1998). Interestingly, a similar escape function has been proposed to be the primary drive for suicidal behavior (Baumeister, 1990). Like in bingeing, this theory proposes that suicide functions as an escape from aversive self-awareness, further supporting the rationale for applying a functional model across different behavioral problems.

Several studies support this model by showing that people often report high negative mood before the occurrence of binge episodes (Davis et al., 1985; Davis et al., 1988; Lingswiler et al., 1989; Powell and Thelen, 1996; Telch and Agras, 1996; Agras and Telch, 1998) and decreases in negative mood following binge eating (Kaye et al., 1986).

Others have suggested that negative mood may actually increase immediately following binge episodes (Hilbert and Tuschén-Caffier, 2007) but then decrease following compensatory behaviors (i.e., purging) (Lynch et al., 2000; Smyth et al., 2007).

Additional work provides support for the other three functions outlined in the four-function model described above. For instance, dissociation often precedes binge-eating episodes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2001; Engelberg et al., 2007), suggesting that binge eating may function as APR in an attempt to ground oneself via feeling generation. However, in this case, binge eating may also occur as an attempt to relieve the distress caused by dissociation, a perspective that corresponds more closely to ANR. Furthermore, although the link between bingeing and purging and social influence is less clear, research has highlighted the overlap between bulimia and social anxiety (Grabhorn et al., 2005; McLean et al., 2007). Thus, binge eating may serve an SNR function if working to avoid others in the context of this anxiety. An evolutionary perspective has suggested bulimia may be the result of competition for mates (Faer et al., 2005), which represents an SPR function. In this theory, high body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness contribute to bulimic symptoms which function to improve this body dissatisfaction and increase attraction from potential mates.

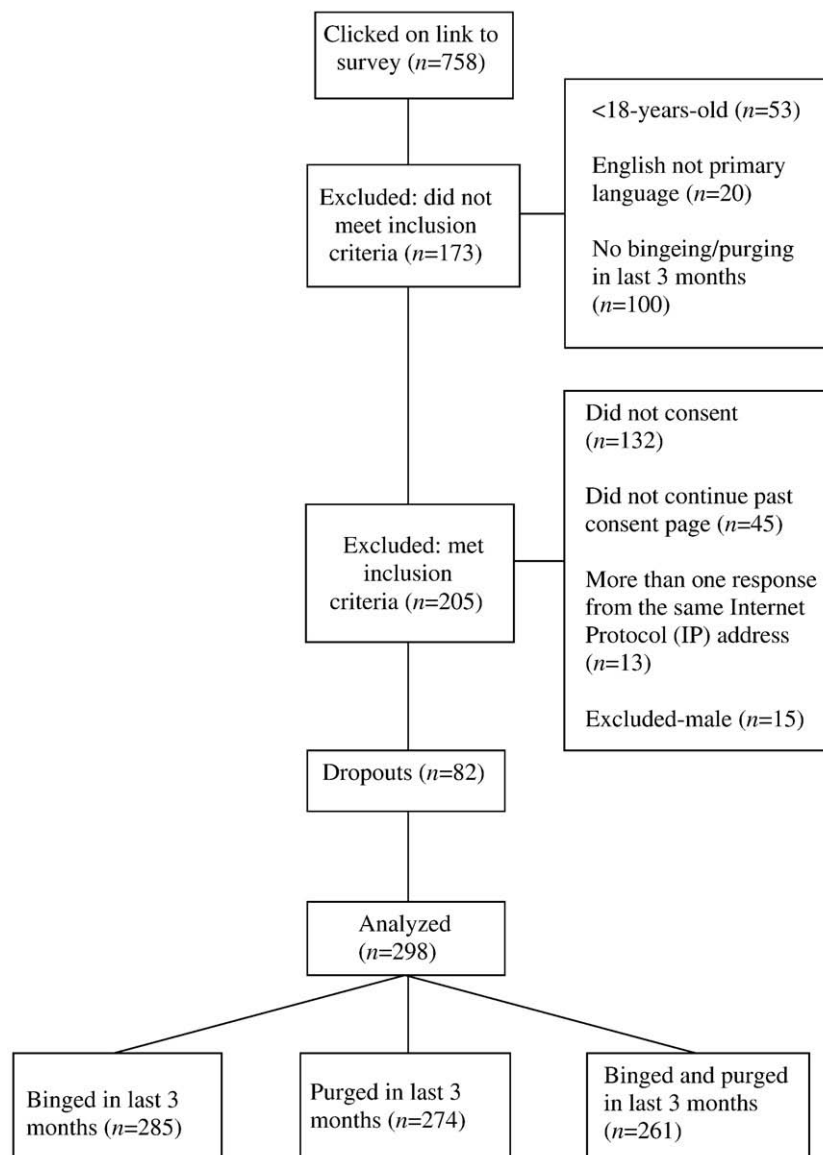


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of participant inclusion.

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