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Research paper

The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress in the Relationship between Experiential Avoidance and Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms

Ameri, Narjes [1]; Najafi, Mahmoud * [2]

1. M.A in General psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran. Email: narges.ameri9473@gmail.com
2*. Corresponding Author: Associate Professor, Department of Clinical Psychology, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran. Email: m_najafi@semnan.ac.ir

Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the mediating role of psychological distress (stress, anxiety and depression) in the relationship between experiential avoidance and obsessive-compulsive symptoms in students. The research method was descriptive-correlational (structural equations, path analysis) and the statistical population of the study was all students of Semnan University in the academic year 2019-2020. Using the available sampling method, 311 students participated in the study through the online calling. The instruments were the Obsessive–compulsive Disorder-revision (OCD-R), Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scales (DASS-21) and the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II). The results showed that psychological distress has a mediating role in obsessive-compulsive syndrome and planning to promote psychological resilience can play an important role in reducing obsessive-compulsive symptoms due to psychological distress.

Keywords: Anxiety, depression, experiential avoidance, obsessive-compulsive, stress

Introduction

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is identified by a set of symptoms that include disturbing thoughts, rituals, anxiety, and compulsion. Obsessing invades the sufferer's mind and leads to widespread anxiety (Adams, et al., 2018). According to previous research, experiential avoidance is one of the structures associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (Xiong, et al., 2021, Angelakis & Pseftogianni, 2021, Cowan, 2020). Experiential avoidance refers to the unwillingness to relate to unwanted inner experiences and manifests itself as obsessive compulsion (Reuman, et al., 2018). Another variable affecting the onset and persistence of obsessive-compulsive symptoms is psychological distress (Den Ouden, et al., 2020) which is an undesirable mental state of anxiety and depression (Spendelow & Joubert, 2018). Recent research has also shown that experiential avoidance is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Spendelow & Joubert, 2018). Few researches have studied the effect of psychological distress on obsessive-compulsive disorder and also, the available findings have reported different results. Examining vulnerable or at-risk groups who engage in coercive behaviors or experience obsessive-compulsive disorder has significant implications for early intervention. Given the importance of obsessive-compulsive disorder among students in terms of affecting their academic, behavioral and social performance and its prevalence, there is a need for research in this area. Therefore, the aim of

this study was to present a model of the role of experiential avoidance mediated by stress, anxiety and depression on obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Method

The present study was descriptive-correlational (structural equations, path analysis). The statistical population was the students of Semnan University in the academic year of 2019-2020. A sample of 311 students were selected by available methods. In order to collect data, the link of the questionnaires was provided to the students through an online call and in order to observe the ethical points, the questionnaires were anonymous.

Tools

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II): The 7 items AAQ-II developed by Bond, et al. (2011), measuring experiential avoidance /psychological inflexibility, with graded responses based on a 7-point Likert scale. The higher scores indicate lower psychological flexibility and higher experiential avoidance. The test-retest reliability and internal consistency of this questionnaire were 0.81 and 0.84, respectively (Bond, et al., 2011). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scales (DASS-21): The DASS-21 includes three components of depression, anxiety and stress. The higher score indicates more severe symptoms. Lovibond & Lovibond (1995) obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient for subscales of 0.91, 0.84 and 0.90, respectively. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.84, 0.78 and 0.83, respectively.

Obsessive–compulsive Disorder-revision (OCD-R): The 18 items OCD-R, with a higher score indicates the presence of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The Cronbach's alpha for Iranian standardized questionnaire, reported by Mohammadi, et al. (2008) was 0.85 for the general scale and 0.50 to 0.72 for the subscales. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale of 0.85 and subscales of 0.79 to 0.88 was obtained.

Results

In order to investigate the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between experiential avoidance and obsessive-compulsive disorder symptoms, the path analysis method was used by using AMOS 22 software. The normality assumption of scores by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was confirmed. For analysis of structural equations based on the sample correlation matrix, between experiential avoidance with the components of obsessive-compulsive disorder symptoms and psychological distress, as well as between each of the variables of psychological distress (anxiety, stress, depression) tested by Pearson correlation coefficients. According to the proposed conceptual model, it is expected that experiential avoidance through stress, anxiety and depression are related to obsessive-compulsive symptoms ($P < 0.01$). The results of the analyzes in Figure 1 show that there is a good fit between the data and the model.

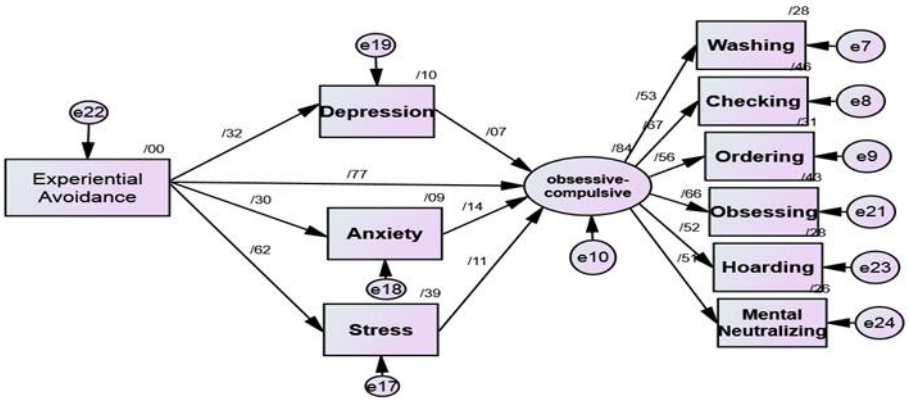

Figure 1: Hypothetical model of the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between experiential avoidance and obsessive-compulsive disorder symptoms

Table 1 shows the standard coefficients of the direct paths of the model.

Predictor variable	Criterion variable	Beta	T	SE	CR	P
experiential avoidance	**stress**	0.64	0.42	0.030	14.21	0.001**
experiential avoidance	**anxiety**	0.32	0.19	0.032	6.005	0.001**
experiential avoidance	**depression**	0.30	0.15	0.028	5.435	0.001**
experiential avoidance	**Obsessive–compulsive Disorder**	0.77	0.11	0.013	8.690	0.001**
depression	**Obsessive–compulsive Disorder**	0.07	0.02	0.010	1.744	0.041*
anxiety	**Obsessive–compulsive Disorder**	0.14	0.04	0.012	3.170	0.002*
stress	**Obsessive–compulsive Disorder**	0.11	0.02	0.011	2.139	0.032*

According to Table 2, the fit indices of the final model indicate the relatively good fit of the model. The results provided evidence to support experiential avoidance as an underlying mechanism underlying obsessive-compulsive disorder. According to the results of the bootstrap test, all paths of the model were confirmed.

Table 2: Research model fit

X2	d.f	X2/df	P	GFI	AGFI	CFI	IFI	NFI	RMSEA
90.011	32	2/81	0.001	0.97	0.91	0.93	0.90	0.93	0.07

Discussion

The results showed that the proposed model has an acceptable fit. Accordingly, psychological distress is one of the factors affecting obsessive-compulsive disorder that leads to the formation of obsessive beliefs and obsessive behaviors are created in an attempt to reduce anxiety avoidance. Psychological distress is considered as a latent factor that affects a wide range of obsessive behaviors. In general, empirical avoidance is directly and indirectly related to the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder through its effect on psychological distress. The statistical population and the use of self-report tools for data collection are among the limitations of the research. By focusing on empirical avoidance and teaching ways to control psychological distress, steps can be taken to prevent psychological problems and design

treatment programs in the student population to help people with the disorder to have a better life, to be located and its underlying factors to be identified.

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Conflicts of interest

Authors found no conflict of interests.