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Is The Black Dog Really A Dalmatian?

An Investigation Into Whether Stress Impact and Attributional Style Lead to Different Outcomes for Individuals Receiving 20 Sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Depression

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Abstract

There is a need for greater clarity in the relationship between psychosocial stress and depression and its application to outcomes in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). A preponderance of research focuses primarily on the causal relationship between stress and depression and is limited by the traditional assumption of homogeneity amongst first-episode sufferers of mild to moderate depression. In actual fact, the perceived intensity and type of stress as well as an individual's attributional style may create significant differences in how they respond to therapy and overcome depression.

This research had four aims: to develop an understanding about why individuals differ in their CBT recovery trajectories; to examine how the stress-diathesis framework relates to treatment outcomes; to develop a way of effectively assessing and measuring the quantitative impact of stress; and to develop an effective approach towards assessing contextual aspects of stress. The research inquiry was guided by stress-diathesis theory and a reformulated stress-diathesis framework was proposed that specified a quantitative – qualitative stress distinction. This accorded with the study's development of two stress measures. A measure for objectively quantifying stress was introduced, along with a therapist questionnaire that identifies precipitating stressors in depression and the qualitative aspects of the stress experience.

A final sample of 26 clients experiencing their first episode of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) was achieved. Clients were recruited for 20 sessions of CBT with 2- and 6-month follow-ups. Depression severity was measured each session with the *Beck Depression Inventory* (*BDI-II*) and attributional style was measured at six time points with the *Attributional Style Questionnaire* (*ASQ*). Stress impact was measured using the *Impact of Event Scale – Video Format* (*IES-VF*) and the *Identification of Precipitating Stressors Questionnaire* (*IPSQ*) was developed to assess precipitating stressors of depression. Multilevel analysis suggested that attributional style moderates the relationship between change in stress and change in depression. Clients with predominantly depressogenic attributional styles showed a delay in depression improvement compared to clients with non-depressogenic styles, even when significant stress reductions were achieved. Gender, therapy completion and marital status were also significant predictors of recovery. Preliminary support was achieved for the classification of clients into three recovery subgroups, according to whether they

achieved rapid, expected or minimal stress improvements. Post-hoc analyses also indicated that chronicity and impact on autonomy appear to be the most influential stressor characteristics. Implications for future research and clinical considerations are discussed.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ---- i

Acknowledgements ---- iii

Table of Contents ---- v

List of Tables ---- x

List of Figures ---- xi

Chapter 1: Introduction ---- 1

Overview ---- 1

Organisation ---- 3

Chapter 2: Depression and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy ---- 5

Aims and Scope ---- 5

Why Study Depression? ---- 5

Epidemiology of Depression ---- 6

Why Study Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)? ---- 10

Origins of CBT ---- 11

CBT and the Cognitive Model of Depression ---- 13

Efficacy of CBT for Depression ---- 16

Summary ---- 20

Chapter 3: Stress ---- 22

Aims and Scope ---- 22

Stress and Depression ---- 22

Models of Interaction ---- 23

Overview of Research Findings ---- 26

Research Gaps ---- 29

Methodological Considerations ---- 30

Defining Stress ---- 30

Measuring Stress ---- 31

Summary ---- 37

Chapter 4: Attributional Style ---------- 38

Aims and Scope ---------- 38

Attributional Style and Depression ---------- 38

Overview of the Theory Underpinning Attributional Style ---------- 39

Measuring Attributional Style ---------- 43

Research Issues ---------- 46

The Stability of Attributional Style ---------- 47

Methodological Issues in Attributional Style Research ---------- 47

Research Gaps ---------- 49

Summary ---------- 49

Chapter 5: The Stress-Diathesis Model ---------- 51

Aims and Scope ---------- 51

The Stress-Diathesis Model – A Current Perspective ---------- 51

A Reformulated Stress-Diathesis Model of Depression and Recovery -------- 52

Study Objectives ---------- 54

Hypotheses ---------- 55

Chapter 6: Methodology ---------- 56

Aims and Scope ---------- 56

Current Study ---------- 56

Therapist Training Phase ---------- 56

Clinical Phase ---------- 57

Treatment Sample ---------- 58

Study Criteria ---------- 59

Recruitment ---------- 59

Treatment Process ---------- 59

Study Measures ---------- 60

Beck Depression Inventory – Revised (BDI-II) ---------- 60

Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) ---------- 61

Measuring Stress ---- 62

Part 1: Identifying Types of Precipitating Stressors ---- 62

Part 2: Measuring Stress Impact ---- 64

Summary ---- 71

Chapter 7: Analytical Approach ---- 72

Aims and Scope ---- 72

Introduction to Multilevel Analysis ---- 72

Initial Considerations ---- 73

Defining Variables as Time-Variant or Time-Invariant ---- 79

Defining the Data Set ---- 83

Model Assessment and Model Fit ---- 88

Summary ---- 91

Chapter 8: Results ---- 93

Aims and Scope ---- 93

Participants ---- 93

Reliability Analyses ---- 95

Reliability of the BDI-II ---- 95

Reliability of the IES-VF ---- 96

Determining the Variance in the Data Set ---- 102

Assessing the Variance in Depression (BDI-II) ---- 102

Assessing the Variance in Stress Impact (IES-VF) ---- 104

Assessing the Variance in Attributional Style (ASQ) ---- 106

Preliminary Correlation Analysis ---- 108

Visual Inspection of Differences in Trajectories for Level-2 Subgroups ---- 110

Multilevel Model Comparison ---- 112

Fitting Two Unconditional Multilevel Models for Change ---- 113

Introducing Predictors Into the Multilevel Model ---- 116

Summary of the Multilevel Model ---- 120

Post-Hoc Analyses ---- 121

Results from the Identification of Precipitating Stressors Questionnaire (IPSQ) ---- 121
Demographic Variables ---- 124
Re-modelling the Multilevel Model with Control Variables ---- 126
A Closer Consideration of the Relationship Between Stress and Depression 130
Summary ---- 131

Chapter 9: Discussion ---- 133
Aims and Scope ---- 133
Revisiting the Primary Hypotheses ---- 133
Contribution to Current Research ---- 138
Methodology ---- 138
Depression ---- 140
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy ---- 142
Attributional Style ---- 143
Stress ---- 147
Areas for Further Investigation ---- 153
Replication and Sample Considerations ---- 153
Methodological Considerations ---- 154
Implications for Clinical Practice ---- 156
Summary ---- 159

Chapter 10: Conclusion ---- 160

References ---- 163

Appendices ---- 207

Appendix A: Study Advertisement

Appendix B: Publicity for the Depression Study

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Appendix D: Identification of Precipitating Stressors – Therapist Questionnaire

Appendix E: *IES-VF* Scoring Sheet

Appendix F: *IES-VF* Interrater Reliability by Percent Agreement During the Training Phase

Appendix G: Normal Probability and Residual Plots for Predictor Variables

Appendix H: Comparison of Results Using Different Data Set Exclusion Criteria

Appendix I: Comparison of Results Using Different Numbers of Sessions

Appendix J: Curve Estimation Analysis for All Clients

Appendix K: Reliability Analysis of *IES-VF*

Appendix L: Depression Severity (*BDI-II*) Change Across Therapy

Appendix M: Stress Impact (*IES-VF*) Change Across Therapy

Appendix N: Attributional Style (*ASQ*) Change Across Therapy

Appendix O: Demographic Forms

Appendix P: Post-Hoc Correlation Analyses Incorporating Control Variables

Appendix Q: Post-Hoc Multilevel Analyses

Appendix R: Percentage Improvement in *BDI-II* Scores From Intake to Mid-Therapy

Appendix S: Accepted Abstract for an Oral Paper Presentation at the World Congress of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (Boston, 2010)

List of Tables

Chapter 2

Table 2.1 Guiding Principles of CBT

Chapter 6

Table 6.1 Summary of the *IES-VF* Interrater Reliability Analysis Across All Training Sessions Calculated Using Percentage Agreement

Table 6.2 Calculation of Chance Agreement Rates Using the *IES-VF*

Chapter 7

Table 7.1 Overview of the Amount of Missing Data in the Final Data Set

Table 7.3 Follow-Up Attendance Rates

Chapter 8

Table 8.1 Baseline Characteristics of Participants

Table 8.2 Reliability Analysis of the *BDI-II* Across All Sessions

Table 8.3 Percentage of Missing Data in *IES-VF*

Table 8.4 Reliability Analysis of *IES-VF* Measured by Cronbach's Alpha – Final Item Analysis Using Seven Items

Table 8.5 A Comparison of Reliability Analysis Results From the Final and Original Versions of the *IES-VF* Measured by Cronbach's Alpha

Table 8.6 Results of Fitting Within-Client Exploratory OLS Regression Models for *BDI-II*, Stress Impact and Attributional Style as a Function of Linear Time

Table 8.7 Correlations Between *BDI-II*, Stress Impact and Attributional Style (Initial Estimates and Rates of Change)

Table 8.8 Results of Fitting the Unconditional Means Model and the Unconditional Growth Model to *BDI-II* Data

Table 8.9 Results of Fitting a Multilevel Model to *BDI-II* Data That Controls for Stress Curve and Attributional Style

Table 8.10 Distribution of Variance in Models Incorporating Additional Control Variables

Table 8.11 Multilevel Results for the Final Model

List of Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 Twelve month prevalence rates for MDD in New Zealand

Figure 2.2 Overview of diagnosed mood disorders by ethnicity for New Zealand adults

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1 The stress continuum

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1 A reformulated stress-diathesis model of depression and recovery

Chapter 6

Figure 6.1 Client participation at each stage of the present study

Figure 6.2 Overview of measurement sources for the stress-diathesis model

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1 Normal probability and standardised residual plot for *BDI-II*

Figure 7.2 Client attributional style *ASQ* scores across the course of therapy

Figure 7.3 Sensitivity analysis of stress curve groupings

Chapter 8

Figure 8.1 Average change trajectory for *BDI-II* data

Figure 8.2 Fitted OLS trajectories for client *BDI-II* scores in the current study

Figure 8.3 Average change trajectory for stress impact data

Figure 8.4 Fitted OLS trajectories for client stress impact scores in the current study

Figure 8.5 Average change trajectory for *ASQ* data

Figure 8.6 Fitted OLS trajectories for client *ASQ* scores in the current study

Figure 8.7 Differences in average *BDI-II* trajectories for clients with rapid, expected and minimal stress improvements

Figure 8.8 Differences in average *BDI-II* trajectories for clients with depressogenic and non-depressogenic attributional styles

Figure 8.9 Overview of results from the *IPSQ*

Figure 8.10 Comparison of the Level-2 variance associated with models incorporating different control variables

Figure 8.11 Attributional style moderates the relationship between change in stress impact and change in depression

Chapter 9

Figure 9.1 Attributional style moderates the relationship between stress impact and depression