INTRODUCTION

The reformulated learned helplessness theory (Abramson et al., 1978) as well as the hopelessness theory (Abramson et al., 1989) are cognitive diathesis-stress models of depression which follow from the original learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1974). The reformulated learned helplessness theory (Abramson et al., 1978) infused attribution theory into the original model and posited that the causal attributions that individuals assign to events in their lives would confer protection from-or risk for depression. Specifically, the attributional component of the reformulated learned helplessness theory, referred to as explanatory style, is defined as an individual’s relatively stable tendencies in assigning causes to negative events. Individuals who attribute negative life events to internal, (i.e. “It’s all my fault”), stable, (i.e. “It will be around for a long time”) and global (i.e. “It will affect everything I do”) causes are thought to be more vulnerable to depression when confronted by these events in the reformulated learned helplessness theory. Explanatory style thus retains the causal attribution component but de-emphasizes the internality dimension in favor of the stability and globality dimensions. Considerable evidence supports the relationship of cognitive content to the etiology, maintenance, and treatment of emotional disorders (Alloy, et al., 1999; Abela & Seligman, 2000). However, this focus on cognitive content has left room for inquiries into the nature of cognitive processes in predicting depression.

Explanatory flexibility (Fresco et al., 2000) has been defined as the process by which attributions to life events are made. Explanatory flexibility assesses the relative variability of respondents’ self-ratings on the stable and global dimensions of the Attributional Style Questionnaire. Specifically, individuals with a large standard deviation are able to attribute events to a variety of causes, and are regarded as flexible, whereas individuals with a small standard deviation are regarded as rigid. The current study sought to extend previous research showing that explanatory flexibility is an independent construct from explanatory style (Fresco & Craighead, 2003; Fresco et al., 2000) and exploring the differences in explanatory style as a function of explanatory flexibility, with regard to depression, anxiety, emotion regulation and emotional intelligence.

METHODS

Participants

Sample 1

• 725 undergraduate students
• 33% male, 67% female
• 1% Asian, 13% African American, 82% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, 2% Other
• Participants ranged from 16-78 years of age (M = 19.37 SD = 4.52)

Sample 2

• 202 undergraduate students
• 38% male, 62% female
• Participants ranged from 17-54 years of age (M = 22.04 SD = 8.02)

Measures

• Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982)
• Mood & Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire (Watson & Clark, 1991)
• Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Hayes et al., 2004)
• Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003)
• Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale (Hayes & Feldman, 2004)
• Response Styles Questionnaire (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991)
• Langer Mindfulness Scale (Langer, 1999)

RESULTS

To examine the independence of explanatory style and explanatory flexibility, both were divided into tertiles, thereby creating a 3x3 matrix. A Chi-Square analysis was then conducted, revealing a generally comparable distribution across the 3x3 matrix. The results were:

- In Sample 1: χ²(4, N = 725) = 9.27, p = .06, w = .10
- In Sample 2: χ²(4, N = 202) = 6.88, p = .14, w = .08

Participants were then classified into one of 9 groups based on their tertile membership status ranging from rigid pessimists to flexible pessimists. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine any relationships between levels of optimism and flexibility to other criterion measures. Two non-orthogonal planned contrasts were conducted to permit comparisons of rigid optimists to flexible optimists and between rigid pessimists to flexible pessimists. Omnibus and the contrast analysis revealed no group differences in depression as a function of optimism and flexibility status.

- In contrast 1, rigid versus flexible pessimists were found to exhibit higher levels of anxious arousal (d = .27). No other significant differences were detected between flexibility and depression for either optimists or pessimists.

- In contrast 2, rigid optimists showed a trend towards higher levels of fear of potent positive emotions (d = .18, p = .07, d = .27); as well as significantly higher levels of fear of anxiety and a greater need to control their emotions (d = .27). Flexible optimists were found to seek novel situations more (d = .39), exhibit more openness to experience and express positive emotions (d = .28) than rigid optimists. All findings corresponded to between small and medium effect sizes (Cohen’s d = .25 to .39).

ABSTRACT

The present study sought to explore the relationship of explanatory flexibility to explanatory style and to examine the differences in explanatory style as a function of explanatory flexibility, with regard to depression, anxiety, emotion regulation and emotional intelligence. Two samples of undergraduate students were collected, sample 1 (n = 725) completed the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982), which serves as both a measure of explanatory style and explanatory flexibility. Sample 2 (n = 202) completed measures of both explanatory style, explanatory flexibility, depression, anxiety, emotion regulation, and emotional intelligence. In sample 1, explanatory style and explanatory flexibility were found to be independent of one another, with this nearly equal (p = .36) corresponding to Cohens’s convention for a small effect size (Cohen, 1992; Cohens’s w = .10). Sample 2 also revealed that explanatory flexibility and explanatory style were largely independent; although the nonsignificant result in sample 2 (p = .14) suggests this to a lesser extent (w = .25). The interaction of explanatory flexibility and explanatory style was also assessed in sample 2, and it was found that (1) rigid versus flexible pessimists were found to exhibit higher levels of anxious arousal (d = .31), (2) rigid optimists showed a trend towards higher levels of fear of potent positive emotions (d = .27), as well as significantly higher levels of fear of anxiety and a greater need to control their emotions, (d = .32), and (3) flexible optimists were found to seek novel situations more (d = .39), have a higher degree of engagement with their surroundings (d = .39), exhibit more openness to experience and express positive emotions (d = .28) than rigid optimists. All findings corresponded to between small and medium effect sizes (d = .25 – .39).

DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that explanatory flexibility is a distinct construct from explanatory style, with differential relationships with extra-test measures of negative affect, emotional intelligence, and emotion regulation. Specifically:

- Rigid pessimists evidenced higher levels of anxiety.
- Rigid optimists evidenced higher levels of fear of both positive and negative emotions.

In contrast 1, rigid versus flexible pessimists were found to exhibit higher levels of anxious arousal (d = .27). No other significant differences were detected between flexibility and depression for either optimists or pessimists.

- In contrast 2, rigid optimists showed a trend towards higher levels of fear of potent positive emotions (d = .18, p = .07, d = .27); as well as significantly higher levels of fear of anxiety and a greater need to control their emotions (d = .27). Flexible optimists were found to seek novel situations more (d = .39), exhibit more openness to experience and express positive emotions (d = .28) than rigid optimists.

- All findings corresponded to between small and medium effect sizes (Cohen’s d = .25 to .39).

REFERENCES


