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Short Report

Relationships among Dependency/ Sociotropy, Self-Criticism/ Autonomy, and Stressful Life Events to Depressive Symptoms

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This study evaluated the congruency hypothesis that individuals become depressed after experiencing stressful life events matching their specific cognitive-personality vulnerabilities. Empirical evidence regarding the congruency hypothesis has been mixed. The participants were 314 undergraduate women who completed a battery of instruments, including the Depressogenic Schemata Scale. The participants were divided into four groups (high depression, pure dependency or sociotropy (DEP-SOC), pure self-criticism or autonomy (SC-AUT), and control). Women who were pure DEP-SOC or pure SC-AUT experienced more symptoms, which contributed negatively to congruent stressful life events. These findings augment the accumulating inconsistencies in tests of the congruency hypothesis.

Key words: congruency hypothesis, stressful life events, depressive symptoms

INTRODUCTION

Personality has traditionally been conceptualized as a diathesis for depressive disorders; its interaction with stressful life events is particularly congruous. Dependency and self-criticism were analyzed by Blatt (1974) from a psychodynamic orientation. Sociotropy and autonomy were analyzed by Beck (1983) from a cognitive perspective. Dependency or sociotropy (DEP-SOC) and self-criticism or autonomy (SC-AUT) as personality dimensions of vulnerability enabled the formulation of the congruency hypothesis. This hypothesis includes precise predictions of interactions between personality and stressful life events. However, empirical support for the congruency hypothesis has been mixed. Recent research posits that these personalities may be outcomes, rather than causes, of depression; thus, depressive individuals may exhibit both high DEP-SOC and high SC-AUT. Zuroff (1994) suggested that some conceptual overlap may exist between self-criticism and sociotropy, in that both imply the need for others' approval and admiration. In this study, we address a mediating model linking personality vulnerability, both interpersonal and achievement-related stressful life events, and depressive symptoms. In Japan, Ietsugu & Kodama (1999) developed the Depressogenic Schemata Scale based on the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (Weissman & Beck, 1978). In the present study, we focus on four subgroups of DEP-SOC and SC-AUT personalities: high-high, high-low, low-high, and low-low. In individuals with high-low and low-high DEP-SOC and SC-AUT, interpersonal or achievement-related stressful life events can affect depressive symptoms. We predicted that for pure DEP-SOC, negative interpersonal life events would be related to increased depressive symptoms. We also expected negative achievement life events to be related to increased depressive symptoms.

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METHOD

Participants and procedure

The participants were 314 female university students with a mean age of 20.57 (SD=3.60) years recruited from two university. Ninety-nine students were recruited at University A in 2004 (M=21.64, SD=5.92). One hundred forty-five students were recruited at University B in 2009. They completed questionnaires assessing DEP-SOC and SC-AUT, interpersonal and achievement-related stressful life events, and depressive symptoms.

Measures

Depressogenic Schemata Scale (DSS). DSS (Ietsugu & Kodama, 1999) was created to measure individual differences in depressogenic schemata (three factors: Intention of High Achievement, Dependence on Others for Self-evaluation, and Fear of Failure). "Intention of High Achievement," which refers to performance evaluation, is similar to SC-AUT. "Dependence of Evaluation on Others," which refers to interpersonal approval, is similar to DEP-SOC.

Participants were divided into four groups, according to the median of Intention of High Achievement and Dependence on Others for Self-evaluation: high depression (N=109), pure DEP-SOC (N=57), pure SC-AUT (N=58), and control (N=90). The means, standard deviations, and differences in the four groups are presented in Table 1.

Life Events Scale. The Life Events Scale (Takahira, 1998) is a 60-item self-report questionnaire developed to assess positive and negative events experienced by undergraduate students in interpersonal and achievement domains.

Self-rating Depression Scale (SDS). The Japanese version of the Zung SDS (Fukuda & Kobayashi, 1973) is a self-report measure of depression consisting of 20 items.

RESULTS

A 2 (high vs. low DEP-SOC)×2 (high vs. low SC-AUT) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on depressive symptoms. The only significant effect was main effects for

Table 1. Stressful life events and depressive symptoms in four groups.

	1. Control (n=90)		2. Pure DEP-SOC (n=57)		3. Pure SC-AUT (n=58)		4. High depression (n=109)	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Interpersonal life events	0.18	(.20)	0.26	(.21)	0.25	(.20)	0.27	(.22)
Achievement-related life events	0.24	(.19)	0.26	(.18)	0.31	(.18)	0.30	(.19)
Depressive symptoms	1.93	(.35)	2.08	(.41)	2.12	(.41)	2.20	(.38)

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting depressive symptoms from negative life events with four groups.

	Depressive symptoms							
	1. Control		2. Pure DEP-OC		3. Pure SC-AUT		4. High depression	
Predictor	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.05†		.01		.07		.01	
Control variables								
Step 2	.01		.05		.10†		.06*	
DEP-SOC		−.09		.12		−.21		−.03
SC-AUT		.07		−.15		−.26*		.25*
Step 3	.11**		.13*		.14**		.08*	
Interpersonal life events		.20†		.31*		−.11		.14
Achievement-related life events		.17		.11		.44*		.18
Total R^2	.17*		.20†		.31**		.15**	

Note. Control variables included age and university (university A=1, B=2). DEP-SOC=dependency/sociotropy (Dependence of Evaluation on Others). SC-AUT=self-criticism/autonomy (Intention of High Achievement). $^{\dagger}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$.

DEP-SOC and SC-AUT ($F(1, 309)=6.31, 11.08, p<.05$). Thus, high DEP-SOC was higher than low DEP-SOC, and high SC-AUT was higher than low SC-AUT on depressive symptoms. A 2 (high vs. low DEP-SOC)×2 (high vs. low SC-AUT) ANOVA was performed on negative interpersonal life events. The only significant effect was main effects for DEP-SOC ($F(1, 309)=4.34, p<.05$). Thus, high DEP-SOC was higher than low DEP-SOC on negative interpersonal life events. A 2 (high vs. low DEP-SOC)×2 (high vs. low SC-AUT) ANOVA was performed on negative achievement life events. The only significant effect was main effects for SC-AUT ($F(1, 308)=5.77, p<.05$).Thus, high SC-AUT was higher than low SC-AUT on negative achievement life events.

Regression analysis indicated that among individuals with pure DEP-SOC, only negative interpersonal life events predicted increased depressive symptoms; however, among individuals with pure SC-AUT, only achievement-related stressful life events predicted increased depressive symptoms. Among individuals in the high depression and control groups, stressful life events did not predict depressive symptoms (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that in females, interpersonal stressful life events can cause elevated depressive symptoms in those with high DEP-SOC (but not SC-AUT), whereas achievement-related stressful life events can cause elevated depressive symptoms in those with high SC-AUT (but not DEP-SOC). These findings suggest the need to consider DEP-SOC, SC-AUT, and stressful life events as causes of depression and as indicative of the need to investigate the relationship between personality and stressful life events in depression.

For individuals with high DEP-SOC and high SC-AUT, stressful life events were not related to depressive symptoms. DEP-SOC and SC-AUT are clearly distinguishable in terms of the interpersonal content that they reflect (Dunkley, Blankstein, & Flett, 1997). Individuals with DEP-SOC can be described as neurotic individuals who are positively oriented toward other people, while SC-AUT individuals can be described as neurotic individuals lacking warmth and straightforwardness. Thus, individuals who have high DEP-SOC and high SC-AUT have already included as a predictor of state depression.

Individuals with low levels of both DEP-SOC and SC-AUT reported significantly lower interpersonal stressful life events and depressive symptoms than did individuals with high levels of both these factors. Thus, DEP-SOC and SC-AUT serve as factors of vulnerability to depressive symptoms.

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. Self-report questionnaires were used to assess depressive symptoms and stressful life events. Our sample was predominantly female and therefore did not allow for a detailed examination of gender differences.

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