

SOCIAL-COGNITIVE PREDICTORS OF INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY

Mihai Marian *

University of Oradea, Romania

Abstract

This research describes the effects of attributional style on sensitivity from the point of view of the stress-diathesis model, the basic model of the learned helplessness theory. We were especially interested to show the effects of social support, trust, life experiences and negative attributional style on sensitivity. For this purpose we used a sample of 215 subjects, age varying from 18 to 61. Our hypothesis is that negative attributional style, lack of trust and poor social support have direct impact on sensitivity. The variables of this research can form a predictive model of the mentioned disorders, with direct implications in clinical practice and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Keywords: interpersonal sensitivity, social support, attributions, self-esteem, trust

Introduction

Sensitive persons are frequently described as being very careful to others` behaviour and reactions, as they want to make the others happy and to minimise conflicts (McCabe, Blankstein, & Mills, 1999); they are sensible to the threats aiming they social relations, they are unable to be assertive and they have a low self-esteem. Generally, sensitive persons have relationship difficulties because they worry too much about the way in which they are seen by the others - it is the case of the persons who have eating disorders. Increased sensitivity towards criticism can be involved in psychopathological disorders

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to:

* Ph.D., University of Oradea, Faculty of Socio-Humanistic Sciences, Psychology Department, University street, no. 3, Oradea, Bihor, 410087, Romania. E-mail: mmarianster@gmail.com

such as depression or anxious disorders; another type is the sensitivity for being rejected, which is manifested by increased expectations of being rejected and exaggerate perception of rejection (Atlas, 2004; Marian, 2012 a,b), which interferes with satisfaction in life and with couple life.

Interpersonal sensitivity is an efficient predictor of depressive semeiology, mainly in the case when it is accompanied by a low self-esteem (McCabe et al., 1999).

On the other side, trust represents the belief according to which generally we can rely on honesty, good intentions or the truth told by the others (Barefoot, Beckham, Brummett, & Maynard, 1998). The development of the ability for trusting the others is an essential element for the development of a healthy personality. So far, only a reduced number of studies had as a precise objective the study of trust in the others as a variable related to psychical and physical health. Barefoot and his collaborators indicated that trust influences psychical and physical well being and it has effects on longevity. Encouraging trust attitudes can be a method for promoting psychological wellbeing, mainly in the case of the older persons (Barefoot et al., 1998). On the other side, the lack of trust can be an indicator for psychological vulnerability; usually it is replaced by cynicism and by sarcasm and it can lead to isolation and gradually to the installation of depression.

Stressing events can create a specific vulnerability of the adult towards depression. Besides that, the way in which the person explains the reasons which are at the basis of negative events (or positive) from his life is critical in determining negative or positive effects of those events. Anxious and depressed individuals frequently manifest a negative attributional style characterised by internal, stable and global causal explanations for negative events (Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). This attributional style is exhausting because the combination between attributional reactions towards success and failure will allow the integration of negative results and not the positive ones in the structure of self believes.

Objectives

The study proves the fact that negative attributional style, the lack of trust and reduced social support have a direct impact on sensitivity. The results

that we hope to obtain may allow the formulation of a predictive model for the above mentioned disorder, model which can support future corrections.

Method

Participants

There were 215 participants included in the study, 102 men and 113 women, aged between 18 and 61 years old ($m=26,81$; $SD=10,18$). The participants were volunteers and the group is heterogeneous from occupational and educational point of view.

Instruments

The Trust Scale was proposed by Rempel, Holmes and Zanna (1985) and by the means of three dimensions it measures the development and the progress of the relationships between partners. The authors proved that predictability, trust or belief and hope are representative components and dimensions of interpersonal trust. We obtain an alpha Cronbach coefficient .89, which indicates a good internal consistency of the scale.

SCL-90 is a scale made out of 90 items (see Croft, 1999; Holi, 2003) and designed with the declared purpose to reflect symptomatic psychological patterns in the case of psychiatric patients or in the society. High internal consistency (alpha Cronbach .91) of Interpersonal Sensitivity scale and test-retest procedure proved that this instrument can be efficient in practice (see Marian, 2008).

Current Thoughts Scale (C.T.S.) devised by Heatherton and Polivy (1991); it consists of 20 items loaded on three factors: a. performance self-esteem, b. social self-esteem, and c. appearance self-esteem. This instrument was designed to assess one's thoughts at certain times. Marian (2009) reported a .84 alpha coefficient for this scale. The C.T.S. aims to uncover the real effect of the variance of self evaluations on thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (M.S.P.S.S.) devised by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988); it consists of 12 items loaded on three factors: a. family, b. friends, and c. significant others. Each item is structured according to the three factors. Internal consistency is .91 (12 items). Test-retest trust quotient of the two testing phases is between .67 and .80 (see Marian, 2006).

Attributional Style Questionnaire (A.S.Q.) devised by Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, and Seligman (1982); it is a measure of explanatory style patterns which in turn reflects one's tendency to select certain causal explanations for favorable or unfavorable events. The internal consistency reported by Marian (2010; 2012) was $\alpha = .82$ for positive events, and $\alpha = .72$ for negative events. This moderate internal consistency is supported by other findings.

Procedure and design

The participants to this study filled in the tests package presented at the section work instruments. For the protection of the participants, they only noted a code on the answer papers. Based on the results to SCL-90 there were formed experimental groups.

We shall use the variance analysis (ANOVA factorial) considering that we shall observe the simultaneous influence of two interdependent variables on the dependent variable (sensitivity). Interdependent variables were: 1. Negative attributional style (composite-negative); 2. Social support; 3. Self-esteem; 4. Trust in the partner– predictability of the partner.

Results and interpretation

In Table 1 there are presented the relations between the predictability of the partner and general social support. Consequently, in the case of associating the two variables, we observe that the experimental data obtained do neither support the particular influence of predictability nor the one of the social support, but the interaction between them is associated to the increase of interpersonal sensitivity ($F_{(4, 211)}=3,087, p<.01$) which leads us to the idea according to which the beginning of depression is facilitated by lean interaction inside the couple and by the fragility of the social support network.

Table 1. The influence of partner`s predictability and of social support on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Predictability	,502	,60	-
Social support	2,374	,09	-
Predictability * social support	3,087	,01	0,62

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p<.001$

In the case where we analyse the probability of association between self-esteem (social) and trust in the partner (predictability of the partner) statistic data in the case of the lot studied, indicate the fact that predictability is associated to sensitivity ($F_{(2, 211)}=3,418$; $p<.03$) but also with social self-esteem ($F_{(2, 211)}=6,194$; $p<.003$). The two variables do not interact and the rather act isolated in producing the effect (Table 2).

Table 2. The influence of partner`s predictability and of social self-esteem on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Predictability	3,418	,03	0,69
Social self-esteem	6,194	,003	0,81
Predictability * Social self-esteem	1,252	,29	-

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p<.05$

Considering the fact that assignments play an important role in the beginning and in maintaining depression, we tried to apply the same model of *stress-diathesis* and sensitivity which act as a distal factor in the beginning of hopelessness depression. Consequently we observe that stable-negative assignments are associated to interpersonal sensitivity (see Table 3) without interacting to the support from other significant persons. Experimental association of the variables is evident as stable-negative assignments ($F_{(2, 211)}=3,848$; $p<.02$) explain the way in which the person shall interpret at cognitive level the interactions with the persons around.

Table 3. The influence of stable-negative assignments and of the support from other significant persons on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Stable-negative attributions	3.848	.02	0,70
Social support - significant other	1.581	.20	-
Stable-negative attributions * Social support - significant other	1.890	.11	-

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p<.05$

In Table 4 we present the association between global-negative attributions and interpersonal sensitivity; consequently we observe that the

relationship which was formed plays an important role in psychopathology as compared to social factors which rather act in a distal manner.

Table 4. The influence of global-negative assignments and of the support from other significant persons on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Social support - significant other	2.335	.10	-
Global-negative attributions	4.132	.01	0,72
Social support - significant other * global-negative attributions	1.080	.36	-

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p < .01$

The authors of learned helplessness theory suggested the use of negative composite score in the research in order to estimate the impact of negative attributional style psychological disorders (Peterson et al., 1982; Marian, 2011) and mainly on depression. In Table 5 we present the influence of negative attributional style (internal, stable and global) on sensitivity but we observe that it does not interact with self-esteem in the case of the studied lot. Still, the persons with dysadaptive attributional style shall manifest with an increased probability the symptoms specific to interpersonal sensitivity.

Table 5. The influence of negative composite score and of social self-esteem on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Composite score	4.930	.008	0,75
Social self-esteem	2.709	.06	-
Composite score * Social self-esteem	1.966	.10	-

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p < .01$

In present, attributional style just as dysfunctional cognitions can partly explain the way in which a person will develop a disorder or another. In Table 6 we present the data obtained in the case of interpersonal sensitivity which come to support helplessness theory, attributionally reformulated. In other words, negative attributional style (negative composite) and social support are associated to interpersonal sensitivity but they also interact in producing the disorder and this leads us to the conclusion according to which negative

attributional style, the lack of trust in the partner, low self-esteem and poor social support are factors interpersonal sensitivity.

Table 6. The influence of negative composite score and of social support on sensitivity

Source	F	p	η^2
Composite score	4.396	.01	0,72
Social support	3.686	.02	0,69
Composite score * Social support	2.668	.03	0,58

Note 1: η^2 effect size; * $p < .05$

We asked ourselves the question of prediction capacity of ASQ and mainly the one regarding the despair (as expression of negative stable and global assignments) for the beginning and persistency o interpersonal sensitivity and the extent to which it has a positive or a negative value. On the other side we asked ourselves if the predictor was the most important or not?

Table 7 indicates that the three predictors included lead to a regression model significant from statistic point of view which is capable of explaining, in adjusted form of 19% ($R^2 = .181$) of the evolution registered by interpersonal sensitivity dispersion.

Table 7. Summary model of linear regression

R		R^2		
.441		.194		
	B	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	1.782		6.930	.001
Social self-esteem	-.352	-.358	-5.279	.001
Social support	-.145	-.133	-1.977	.05
Hopelessness	.139	.136	2.002	.04

We expect that those persons who are desperate and they appeal to stable and global assignments for failure to become sensitive in social interactions. In the case of self-esteem (- .352) we observe a backward relation, similar situation to social support case (- .145).

The model propose proves that negative attributional style, despair, lack of trust and reduced social support have a direct impact on interpersonal sensitivity. The results obtained allow us to support the predictors of interpersonal sensitivity, but they also can bear future corrections.

Conclusions

The study supports learned helplessness theory attributionally reformulated, more precisely, the attributional style for negative results is a cause of interpersonal sensitivity when negative event is present or anticipated and assigned to internal, stable and global factors. The study indicates that a decrease of well-being and isolation can contribute to the activation of interpersonal sensitivity in combination with stable and negative assignments.

Consequently, a person with a dysadaptive attributional style considers herself as being helpless when dealing with life experiences and emotional wellbeing shall be affected.

Sensitive persons have the tendency to generalise dissatisfaction and negative life events, starting from a particular situation. Learned helplessness resides in the belief that anything the individual would do, the result will always be the same: in other words the result is not congruent with the answer. Helplessness and depression (as a consequence of the increase of interpersonal sensibility) result from the fact that a person did not succeed during the past to control an “incontrollable” situation, situation which is in the same time stressing and painful.

Helplessness feeling which resulted from that experience, does not remain a specific feeling (the explanations were presented in the first part of the study) for that event but most of times it is generalised on events which can be controlled and on interpersonal relations.

We hope that the results obtained to support the formulation of predictive models for the above mentioned disorder, models which fathom and to explicit the psycho-social mechanisms involved with direct benefits for cognitive- behavioural therapy.

References

- Atlas, J. (2004). Interpersonal sensitivity, eating disorder symptoms, and eating/thinness expectancies. *Current Psychology: Developmental, Learning, Personality, Social*, 22(4), 368-378.

- Barefoot, J. C., Beckham, J. C., Brummett, B. H., & Maynard, K. E. (1998). Trust, health, and longevity. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 21(6), 517-526.
- Croft, A. (1999). The SCL-90-R in Clinical Application. *Dynamic Chiropractic*, 3, 17(10).
- Heatherton, T. F., & Polivy, J. (1991). Development and validation of a scale for measuring state self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 895-910.
- Holi, M. (2003). *Assessment of psychiatric symptoms using the SCL-90*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Printing House.
- Marian, M. (2006). Validation of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Psychometric characteristics. *Analele Universității din Oradea, Fascicula Psihologie*, X, 21-35.
- Marian, M. (2008). *Psychological correlations of the helplessness. Clinical and social implications*. PhD. thesis, Cluj-Napoca, Romania: University Babeș-Bolyai (Unpublished PhD. thesis).
- Marian, M. (2009). Validation of a scale for measuring state self-esteem. *Revista de Psihologie Școlară*, 2(4), 40-49.
- Marian, M. (2010). The Attributional Style Questionnaire: A validation study on the romanian population. *Analele Universității din Oradea, Fascicula Psihologie*, XVII, 124-141.
- Marian, M. (2011). The attributional style of adults studied by the experimental induction of negative mood. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Research*, 19(2), 96-116.
- Marian, M. (2012 a). Hypothetical causal model of learned helplessness through structural modelling: experimental data. In K. N. Fountoulakis (Ed.), *2nd International Congress on Neurobiology, Psychopharmacology & Treatment Guidance, Thessaloniki, Greece, November 24-27, 2011* (pp. 93-98). Pianoro (Bologna) Italy: Medimond International Proceedings.
- Marian, M. (2012 b). Trial of hopelessness theory by the use of modelling. New psychometric data on the Hopelessness Depression Symptom Questionnaire. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Research*, 20(1), 45-58.
- Marian, M. (2012). The way perception of behavioural determinants influence the dysfunctional attributions in depression. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Research*, 20(2), 44-60.

- McCabe, R., Blankstein, K., & Mills, J. (1999). Interpersonal sensitivity and social problem-solving: Relations with academic and social self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and academic performance. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 23*(6), 587-604.
- Peterson, C., Semmel, A., von Baeyer, C., Abramson, L. Y., Metalsky, G. I., & Seligman, M. E. P. (1982). The Attributional Style Questionnaire. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 6*, 287-299.
- Rempel, J. K., Holmes, J. G., & Zanna, M. P. (1985). Trust in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*, 95-112.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Abramson, L. Y., Semmel, A., & von Baeyer, C. (1979). Depressive attributional style. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 88*, 242-247.
- Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 52*, 30-41.

Received September, 03, 2013
Revision received July 015, 2013
Accepted August, 29, 2013