Vulnerability Factors in Depression: The Facets of Sociotropy and Autonomy

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Sociotropy-autonomy (Beck, 1983) describes a set of personality dimensions that relate to an individual's vulnerability to depression. Two recently developed scales, the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale (Clark & Beck, 1991) and the Personal Style Inventory (Robins et al., 1994), have been developed in order to assess these personality dimensions. Typically, these measures are used in isolation and little published information is available concerning their interrelationship. The present study examined the relationship between the two scales and specified the various factors that emerge when the items of the two scales are integrated. Six hundred fifty-two participants responded to the Personal Style Inventory (Robins et al., 1994) and the Sociotropy-Autonomy Scale (Clark & Beck, 1991). A factor analysis on all of the items of the two scales revealed a five-factor structure (two sociotropy, two autonomy, and one achievement factor). The relationships among depression, the five derived factors, and the original scales developed by Clark and Beck (1991) and Robins et al. (1994) were critically examined. The results are discussed in the context of vulnerability to depression.

KEY WORDS: depression; measurement; personality; psychopathology.

INTRODUCTION

Given the high incidence of depressive disorders in the general population, considerable effort has been devoted to attempts to understand its etiology. Although many biological, cognitive, and social approaches have

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been taken in order to examine this issue in the past (McCann & Endler, 1990), more recent cognitive approaches taken to depression have suggested some additional variables that are seen as contributing to its occurrence. These variables implicate both cognitive and personality factors.

Past work by Beck (1967, 1976) has highlighted the important role of cognitive biases in eliciting and maintaining depressive episodes. These cognitive biases include characteristics such as inappropriate self-blame and self-criticism, distorted self-images, and a high emphasis on negative aspects of events and negative expectations (Beck, 1967; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Beck, Epstein, and Harrison (1983a) examined these cognitive biases and suggested some individual difference variables that might contribute to the nature of these biases and consequently, to depressive symptoms. Two relatively stable personality dimensions, sociotropy and autonomy were introduced in this context (Beck, 1983). It was suggested that these two dimensions of personality may influence an individual’s vulnerability to depression and, as such, represented critical diatheses in a diathesis-stress model of psychopathology.

The two dimensions, sociotropy and autonomy are conceptualized in the following manner. Sociotropy is seen to be a combination of beliefs, behavioral dispositions, and attitudes that draw an individual to attend to, and depend on others for personal satisfaction (Beck, 1983). Sociotropy can be characterized by an individual’s emphasis on interpersonal interactions involving intimacy, sharing, empathy, understanding, approval, affection, protection, guidance, and help. Individuals who are sociotropic tend to place importance on seeking approval from others and on trying to avoid disapproval from others as much as possible (Beck, 1983).

In contrast, autonomy is a combination of beliefs, behavioral dispositions, and attitudes that draw an individual to invest in one’s self for one’s own uniqueness, mastery over one’s bodily functioning, and control over one’s environment (Beck, 1983). Autonomy can be characterized as an individual’s emphasis on individuality, self-reliance, and a sense of power to do what one wants. Individuals who are autonomous tend to place great importance on self-definition, and individualistic goals which include characteristics such as the tendency to emphasize one’s own needs and rights (Beck, 1983).

According to Beck (1983), individuals who have a high level of either sociotropy or autonomy will be vulnerable to depression when faced with a threat or a loss in a domain corresponding to their specific type of individual investment. For example, a loss of a significant person in one’s life may lead to depression in a sociotropic individual but would be less likely to have such an effect in an autonomous individual (Clark, Beck, & Brown, 1992; Hammen, Ellicott, Gitlin, & Jamieson, 1988; Robins & Block,