



Thinking about worry: Investigation of the cognitive components of worry in children



Caroline L. Donovan^{a,*}, Monique C. Holmes^a, Lara J. Farrell^b, Catherine S. Hearn^a

^a School of Applied Psychology and the Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Mount Gravatt Campus, Mount Gravatt, QLD 4122, Australia

^b School of Applied Psychology and the Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Southport, QLD 4222, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite being extensively studied in adults, investigation of worry and its associated cognitive variables remains in its infancy in paediatric samples.

Aims: This study aimed to investigate 1) whether the child cognitive variables of intolerance of uncertainty (IU), positive beliefs about worry (PBW), negative beliefs about worry (NBW), negative problem orientation (NPO) and cognitive avoidance (CA) were associated with child worry, 2) whether parental worry and cognitive variables were associated with child worry, 3) whether the relationship between child and parent worry was mediated by child cognitive variables and 4) whether the relationships between specific parent cognitive factors and child worry were mediated by specific child cognitive factors.

Method: Participants were 114 children plus one of their parents. Parents and children completed questionnaires assessing each of the five cognitive variables and worry.

Results: When examined together, child NBW and CA significantly predicted child worry. Parent worry, IU and CA were significantly and positively related to child worry. The relationship between parent worry and child worry was mediated by child NBW and CA. The relationship between parent IU, NPO and CA and child worry was mediated by child IU, NPO and CA respectively.

Conclusions: Child NBW and CA may be particularly important to child worry and may represent potential treatment targets. Parental worry and cognitive variables may play a role in the development and / or maintenance of child worry.

1. Introduction

Despite Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) being relatively prevalent in youth and associated with a number of problematic consequences (Albano and Hack, 2004), there has been surprisingly little research conducted with paediatric populations. Central to GAD is 'worry', a construct similarly neglected in the child research area, perhaps because of past misconceptions that children are incapable of engaging in it.

In the adult literature, the conceptual models of GAD proposed by Dugas et al. (1998), Dugas and Robichaud (2007) and Wells (1995) propose that a variety of cognitive variables serve to maintain worry. The cognitive model put forward by Dugas highlights the role of intolerance of uncertainty (IU), negative problem orientation (NPO), positive beliefs about worry (PBW) and cognitive avoidance (CA) in the development and maintenance of worry. Alternatively, the model put

forward by Wells (1995) emphasises the role of PBW, CA and negative beliefs about worry (NBW).

IU is defined as a dispositional characteristic that originates from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its consequences. Those who are high in IU find uncertain situations stressful and upsetting, which consequently disrupts their ability to cope effectively in situations that are uncertain. CA refers to a variety of strategies an individual may engage in to avoid particular thoughts they find stressful. Individuals high on CA actively attempt to avoid or suppress anxiety-provoking cognitions, which has the paradoxical effect of increasing the intrusion of these thoughts and subsequent worry (Wegner and Zanakos, 1994). NPO refers to a set of negative beliefs about, and expectancies relating to, the occurrence of problems and an individual's ability to solve them. Those high on NPO enter into social problems with the expectation of failure or disaster, which inevitably leads to avoidance of problem solving attempts and / or negative

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: c.donovan@griffith.edu.au (C.L. Donovan), m.holmes@griffith.edu.au (M.C. Holmes), l.farrell@griffith.edu.au (L.J. Farrell), c.hearn@griffith.edu.au (C.S. Hearn).

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outcomes (D’Zurilla and Nezu, 1999). Those with PBW, believe that worry is useful as a coping strategy i.e., that it helps them prepare for any contingency, that it prevents bad things from happening, and helps them to cope. However, despite holding PBW, individuals may also simultaneously hold NBW about worry that centre around worry being uncontrollable, aversive and harmful. Thus, although highlighting different cognitive processes, the Dugas and Wells models both emphasise the importance of cognitive variables in the development and maintenance of worry. Furthermore, both models have been tested extensively with adults and have been found to be useful in the conceptualisation of pathological adult worry.

Although in its infancy, there is increasing empirical attention being directed towards worry and its associated cognitive variables in youth. With respect to IU, Thielsch, Andor and Ehring (2015) found IU to significantly predict adolescent worry and Fialko, Bolton and Perrin, (2012) found IU to be a strong, significant predictor of worry and anxiety in youth aged 7–19 years. With respect to children under 12 years specifically, Kertz and Woodruff-Borden (2013) found that IU effectively discriminated between clinical and non-clinical worriers and mediated the association between PBW / NBW and worry in children aged 8–12 years. Finally, Donovan, Holmes and Farrell (2016) found that children aged 8–12 years with GAD reported higher levels of IU than non-anxious control children.

With respect to NPO, only two studies to date have been conducted with children in relation to worry. In a study conducted by Kertz and Woodruff-Borden (2013), NPO was not found to be a unique predictor of worry, nor was it able to discriminate between clinical and non-clinical worriers. However, Donovan et al. (2016) found that children with GAD reported significantly higher levels of NPO than children without an anxiety disorder. Thus, research to date conducted on NPO is both limited and mixed.

Although CA has consistently been found to be associated with worry in adult populations, very little research has been conducted with children. Fialko et al., (2012) found that CA was significantly related to child and adolescent worry while Donovan et al. (2016) found that children with GAD reported significantly higher CA than children without an anxiety disorder. Thus, it would seem that there has been a remarkable lack of research on CA with respect to its role in child worry, although that which has been conducted suggests that CA may contribute to worry in children.

Significantly more research has been conducted with children in regards to PBW and NBW, arguably due to the use of, and psychometric evaluations conducted on, the Metacognitions Questionnaire for Children (MCQ-C; Bacow, Pincus, May, and Brody, 2009) that include subscales measuring these constructs. Overall, there would seem to be more evidence for NBW than PBW in child worry, although the results are somewhat mixed. Bacow et al. (2009) found that NBW but not PBW was associated with worry in children after controlling for excessive worry content. Similarly, Fialko et al. (2012) found that NBW but not PBW significantly predicted worry and anxiety in children, and White and Hudson (2016) found that NBW but not PBW was associated with worry in children. Esbjørn et al. (2015) found evidence favouring NBW in child worry, with NBW being found to predict both worry and anxiety while PBW was found to predict anxiety but not worry. Finally Donovan et al. (2016) found that children with GAD reported significantly higher levels of NBW but not PBW compared to non-anxious children.

Although some researchers have not found PBW to be important with respect to paediatric worry, others have found evidence pointing to its impact. Smith and Hudson (2013) found that clinically anxious children reported higher levels of both PBW and NBW while Fisak et al. (2014) found that PBW and not NBW uniquely predicted child worry. Furthermore, Kertz and Woodruff-Borden (2013) found that PBW not NBW was able to uniquely discriminate between clinically anxious children and non-anxious children. Thus, it would seem that while the evidence to date suggests NBW are important to child worry, the evidence for PBW is rather mixed and therefore less convincing.

If, as the above review suggests, children experience worry, IU, CA, NPO, NBW and PBW, how does it develop? We know that parents are important to a child’s emotional, cognitive, and social development. We also know that children are at increased risk for developing an anxiety disorder if there is a family history of anxiety (Beidel and Turner, 1997), with both genetic and environmental factors implicated (Muris, 2007). It is therefore possible that worry and the cognitive variables associated with it, may also be passed on from parent to offspring through either genetic or environmental factors. That is, parents may inadvertently model, prompt, and reinforce worry and its accompanying cognitive factors.

Although a study by Wilson et al. (2011) found no concordance between parent PBW / NBW and adolescent PBW / NBW, a very recent study has investigated the potential intergenerational transmission of Wells’ metacognitive factors with children under 12 years with positive results. Using the total score of the MCQ-C (and therefore including PBW, NBW, cognitive confidence, need for control, and cognitive self-consciousness), Esbjørn et al. (2016) found that child metacognitions partially mediated the relationship between parent metacognitive variables and child worry, and fully mediated the relationship between parent metacognitive variables and child anxiety. Thus, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that parental cognitive factors may be important to the development of child cognitive factors and subsequent worry. This finding is exciting and warrants replication and extension.

From the above discussion, it is evident that an array of cognitive variables have been implicated in the development of worry according to the adult models put forward by both Dugas and Wells, and there is accumulating evidence that these same cognitive variables may impact on worry in children. There is also preliminary evidence to suggest that parents may play a part in the development of child worry and the cognitive variables associated with it. Building on previous research, the present study had two aims. The first aim was to investigate the relationship between the cognitive variables described above (PBW, NBW, CA, IU and NPO) and worry, both individually and when all variables were considered together. The second aim of the study was to examine the potential influence of parents on child worry, by investigating a) the relationship between parent worry and child worry; b) the mediating role of child cognitive variables in the relationship between parent worry and child worry; and c) the mediating role of child cognitive variables in the relationship between parent cognitive variables and child worry.

In accordance with the two aims of this study, it was hypothesised that: a) higher child IU, PBW, NBW, NPO and CA would be associated with greater child worry; b) higher parental worry, IU, PBW, NBW, NPO and CA would be associated with greater child worry; c) higher levels of parental worry would lead to higher levels of child IU, NBW,

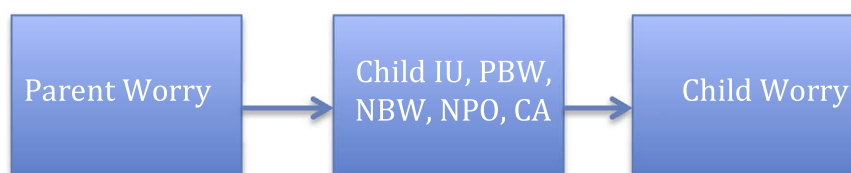


Fig. 1. Hypothesis (c): Child cognitive variables will mediate the relationship between parent worry and child worry.

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