

Intolerance of uncertainty and perceived threat

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Abstract

The present study examined the relations between dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty (i.e., desire for predictability and uncertainty paralysis) and perceptions of threat (i.e., perceptions of the probabilities and costs of future undesirable outcomes) in a sample of 239 college students. Uncertainty paralysis was positively associated with both perceived probabilities and perceived costs for negative outcomes. Desire for predictability was positively associated with perceived costs for negative outcomes but was not associated with perceived probabilities for negative outcomes. When probability estimates for low base rate outcomes were examined separately, desire for predictability was negatively associated with perceived probabilities. Finally, perceived threat partially mediated the relations between dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty and worry. The results of the present study suggest mechanisms through which dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty might lead to excessive worry.

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Introduction

A significant body of research has shown that intolerance of uncertainty is associated with excessive worry in both clinical and nonclinical samples (e.g., Dugas, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1997; Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur, & Freeston, 1998). In fact, research suggests that this association is specific to worry and is not accounted for by shared variance with other relevant constructs, such as perfectionism and intolerance of ambiguity (Buhr & Dugas, 2006; Dugas, Gosselin, & Ladouceur, 2001; Dugas, Marchand, & Ladouceur, 2005; Dugas, Schwartz, & Francis, 2004). Furthermore, there is growing evidence that this relationship is causal. More specifically, treatment research has shown that changes in intolerance of uncertainty generally precede changes in levels of worry (Dugas, Langlois, Rheume, & Ladouceur, 1998). Also, de Bruin, Rassin, and Muris (2006) found that individual differences in intolerance of uncertainty predict state levels of worry following tasks intended to elicit feelings of uncertainty. Finally, experimental research has shown that efforts to manipulate intolerance of uncertainty lead to increases in worry (Ladouceur, Gosselin, & Dugas, 2000).

Although a great deal of research has documented a link between intolerance of uncertainty and worry, surprisingly little research has been conducted to elucidate the specific mechanisms through which intolerance

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of uncertainty leads to excessive worry. Dugas, Buhr, and Ladouceur (2004) have speculated that intolerance of uncertainty may lead to excessive worry in two different ways: (a) by leading to increased levels of positive beliefs about worry, negative problem orientation, and cognitive avoidance (all of which are positively associated with worry) and (b) by increasing perceived threat. In terms of perceived threat, Dugas, Buhr et al. (2004) have posited that high levels of intolerance for uncertainty may cause individuals to (a) overestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes (i.e., increase probability estimates) and (b) overestimate the consequences of negative outcomes (i.e., increase cost estimates). Given the growing evidence that both estimated probabilities of negative outcomes and estimated costs of negative outcomes are positively associated with levels of worry (Berenbaum, Thompson, & Pomerantz, 2007; Butler & Mathews, 1983; MacLeod, Williams, & Bekerian, 1991), it is important to examine whether intolerance of uncertainty is in fact associated with perceptions of threat. After all, Borkovec, Alcaine, and Behar (2004) have argued that “it is the perception of threat that initiates the anxiety process” (p. 81).

Several studies (Berenbaum Bredemeier, & Thompson, *in press*; Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Carleton, Norton, & Asmundson, 2007) have reported factor analyses of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS; Buhr & Dugas, 2002), the most commonly used measure of intolerance of uncertainty. The results of these studies suggest that intolerance of uncertainty is a multidimensional construct. More specifically, Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) described four factors, as did Buhr and Dugas (2002). Carleton, Norton et al. (2007) utilized a combination of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to describe two factors in their proposed abbreviated version of the IUS. Importantly, two common factors emerged in all three studies. The dimension Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) labeled ‘desire for predictability’ closely aligned with the third factor described by Buhr and Dugas (2002). In addition, the seven items Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) used to compute the desire for predictability subscale score were the same seven items included in the Prospective Anxiety subscale of Carleton et al.’s abbreviated IUS. This dimension involves a strong preference to know what will happen in the future and is positively associated with conscientiousness and worry. The dimension Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) labeled ‘uncertainty paralysis’ closely aligned with the first factor described by Buhr and Dugas (2002). The uncertainty paralysis subscale also overlapped some, though not perfectly, with the Inhibitory Anxiety subscale of Carleton et al.’s abbreviated IUS. This dimension involves a tendency to be frozen into inaction by uncertainty and is negatively associated with both decisiveness and extraversion. Other subscales derived by Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) did not significantly overlap with factors/dimensions found in previous research. In summary, mounting evidence supports the idea that the original IUS has at least two stable and replicable dimensions (i.e., desire for predictability and uncertainty paralysis). Furthermore, Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) presented evidence to support the discriminant validity of these two dimensions/subscales. For this reason, we chose to use the desire for predictability and uncertainty paralysis subscales described by Berenbaum et al. (*in press*) in the present study.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relations between dimensions of intolerance of uncertainty and perceived threat. In contrast to Dugas and colleagues, we hypothesized a complex relationship between desire for predictability and probability estimates. Past research has shown that desire for predictability is a core component of the construct of intolerance for uncertainty and has the strongest associations with the core components of a similar construct known as need for cognitive closure (Berenbaum et al., *in press*). In turn, research suggests that individuals who are high in need for cognitive closure process and utilize information differently than do individuals who are low in need for cognitive closure. More specifically, Kruglanski and Webster (1996) have argued that people who are high in need for cognitive closure display “motivated closing of the mind.” In other words, these individuals exhibit two general tendencies: urgency (i.e., an inclination to attain closure or certainty as soon as possible) and permanence (i.e., an inclination to maintain closure or certainty for as long as possible). In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that similar tendencies are observed in individuals who are prone to worry. For example, Bensi and Giusberti (2007) have shown that individuals who are high in trait anxiety have an implicit goal of uncertainty reduction. More specifically, they found that individuals who are high in trait anxiety gather less evidence prior to making a decision. To the extent that individuals with high levels of desire for predictability are likely to exhibit “motivated closing of the mind,” they may be motivated to be more certain in their probability estimates (i.e., have estimates closer to 0% or 100%). More specifically, when a particular outcome seems unlikely to happen, individuals who are high in desire for predictability may report being more certain that it

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