Examining the Relationship between Anxiety, Intolerance of Uncertainty, and Cynicism: I’m not Certain it Matters…

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Introduction

- Cynicism has been associated with interpersonal problems, job stress, burnout, and reduced mental health service use.
- High cynicism is characterized by a negative view of the world, as well as a tendency to consider others as selfish and untrustworthy.
- Conceptually, cynicism may also be related to anxiety.
- Intolerance of uncertainty (IU) is a tendency to be distressed by uncertain future events and has been implicated as a core construct of anxiety, such as IU.
- The current study examined the interrelationship between anxiety, IU, and cynicism, with prospective and inhibitory IU posited as mediators.

Methods

- A total of 262 student and community members (Mage = 30.22, SD = 10.72; 27.5% male) completed measures as part of a larger online study.
- Measures included:
  - Cynicism Scale (CS) – an 11-item self-report measure that assesses negativity and mistrust toward others and the world.
  - State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) – a self-report measure assessing stable and transient dimensions of anxiety.
  - STAI-State (STAI-S) – 20 items measuring stable tendencies to experience anxiety.
  - STAI-Trait (STAI-T) – 20 items measuring current anxiousness.
  - Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-Short Form (IUS-12) – a 12-item self-report measure that assesses individual responses to uncertainty.
  - Prospective subscale – 7 items measuring an individual's negative beliefs about uncertainty.
  - Inhibitory subscale – 5 items measuring an individual's behavioural response to uncertainty.
- Mediational analyses were performed using the Hayes' PROCESS procedure.

Results

- Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.
- Mediation analyses with prospective IU as the mediator are presented in Figure 1.
  - The prospective IUS-12 score statistically significantly mediated the relationship between the STAI-S score and the CS total score (b mediation = 0.11, CI = [0.06, 0.17], \( \chi^2 = 0.07, p < .001 \)).
  - The prospective IUS-12 score statistically significantly mediated the relationship between the STAI-T score and the CS total score (b mediation = 0.13, CI = [0.07, 0.22], \( \chi^2 = 0.12 \)).
- Mediation analyses with inhibitory IU as the mediator are presented in Figure 2.
  - The inhibitory IUS-12 score statistically significantly mediated the relationship between the STAI-S score and the CS total score (b mediation = 0.15, CI = [0.07, 0.23], \( \chi^2 = 0.13 \)).
  - The inhibitory IUS-12 score statistically significantly mediated the relationship between the STAI-T score and the CS total score (b mediation = 0.17, CI = [0.06, 0.30], \( \chi^2 = 0.13 \)).

Discussion

- The current results suggest that IU may play a role in the relationship between anxiety and cynicism.
- Prospective and inhibitory dimensions of IU were significant mediators, suggesting that both present-oriented behavioural inhibition and future-oriented distress due to uncertainty may help account for the relationship between anxiety and cynicism.
- The unpredictability of others can make the world appear chaotic and threatening and may lend itself to a negative outlook for people with high IU.
- Individuals with high IU may be uncertain about a number of things, including the consequences of mental health treatment.
- Increased uncertainty may result in cynicism about mental health treatment outcomes, behavioural inhibition, and reduced service use.
- The current sample was derived from a general population of students and community members; future research should make use of clinical samples.
- Future research should also explore the relationship between anxiety, IU, and cynicism, with a focus on behavioural outcomes and implications for access to mental health services.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for CS, IUS-12 and STAI scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CS Total</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUS Total</td>
<td>29.81</td>
<td>9.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUS Inhibitory IU</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUS Prospective IU</td>
<td>19.37</td>
<td>5.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Anxiety</td>
<td>34.72</td>
<td>10.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait Anxiety</td>
<td>40.95</td>
<td>11.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Prospective IU Mediation Model

Note: Mediated regression models with the Prospective IU subscale score of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-Short Form as a mediating variable between subscale scores (i.e., State, Trait) of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and Cynicism Scale total score. *p = 0.05; **p = 0.01; ***p = 0.001

Figure 2. Inhibitory IU Mediation Model

Note: Mediated regression models with the Inhibitory IU subscale score of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-Short Form as a mediating variable between subscale scores (i.e., State, Trait) of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and Cynicism Scale total score. *p = 0.05; **p = 0.01; ***p = 0.001

For more information about this project please contact the presenting author: isaac.g.hahn@gmail.com

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