Abstract

VERBAL BEHAVIOR IN INDIVIDUALS WITH GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER AND DEPRESSIVE DISORDERS

by

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Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and clinical depression are both internalizing disorders characterized by sustained negative affect and have mainly been studied utilizing either self-report or physiological measures. Fewer studies have focused on behavioral indices of these disorders, and little is known about their overlapping and distinct linguistic features. The present research examined the above gap in two separate studies. Study 1 synthesized previous efforts made to study the linguistic features of individuals with depression. Previous investigations found that depressed individuals evidence high proportions of I-words, high proportions of negatively-valenced words, low proportions of positively-valenced words, and high proportions of cognitive words. However, these investigations had several limitations: they did not identify word categories that were specific to depression, they made relatively vague conceptual connections between language variables and their underlying psychological meaning, and they overly-relied on one software tool—the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) and its predefined content-based word categories. Study 1 also offered a roadmap for more nuanced, theoretically based investigations of the linguistic characteristics of depressed individuals. Study
utilized the conceptual and methodological insights from Study 1 to empirically examine the language of individuals with GAD, with or without comorbid depression (MDD and Dysthymic Disorder) as they described peak autobiographical episodes: the happiest event of their lives, the saddest event in their lives, and the most anxiety-provoking situation they can imagine. Results showed that adults with comorbid GAD and depression used less specific language, but adults with GAD-only did not. Furthermore, while adults with comorbid Dysthymic Disorder (GAD+dys) were less specific across the entire interview, adults with comorbid MDD (GAD+MDD) were less specific only when describing happy memories. Second, adults with GAD+MDD were impaired in their ability to generate meaning from happy events. Adults with GAD+MDD also showed increased cognitive efforts at meaning-making, suggesting that they utilize ineffective verbal emotion regulation strategies. Finally, adults with GAD-only, as well as individuals with GAD+MDD, used language associated with less psychological distance than healthy controls. Taken together, these studies advance the knowledge of verbal behavior in adults with GAD and clinical depression and have the potential to inform both clinical practice and future research efforts.