Early psychopathological features in Spanish adolescents

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Schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms are quite common among adolescents, and have been considered as risk markers for schizophrenia-spectrum and mood disorders. The main goal of the present study was to analyze the relationship between schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms in a community sample of non-clinical adolescents. The sample comprised a total of 1653 participants, 794 male (48%), with an average age of 15.94 years (SD = 1.23). Results showed that schizotypal traits and depressive symptoms were closely related at a subclinical level. Canonical correlation analysis indicated that the two sets of variables shared approximately 48% of the variance. The study of the dimensionality underlying the subscales of the self-reports revealed the presence of three components, namely: Depressive, Anhedonia and Reality Distortion. These results are convergent with previous studies conducted in both clinical and non-clinical samples, indicating overlap between schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms.
of adolescents. In this regard, it is interesting to examine which types of schizotypal experiences are most closely related to the different dimensions of depressive symptoms at this subclinical level. This would allow us to better understand the role of schizotypal traits and depressive symptomatology as risk markers for schizophrenia-spectrum disorders and affective disorders, without the inconveniences of the associated confounding effects frequently found in patients with schizophrenia (Kwapil et al., 2008). Furthermore, it would help us to better understand the expression of the psychotic phenotype and its relationship with a closely associated variable, depression, in general populations and at a developmental stage of special risk for the development of psychological disorders. We are guided, therefore, by the hypothesis that depressive symptoms and schizotypal traits are closely related in adolescence at a non-clinical level. It is expected that the correlations between both variables will be moderate, sharing a high percentage of associated variance. Likewise, in congruence with previous factorial studies, it is hypothesized that a dimensional structure will be found, composed of three factors: Positive, Negative, and Depressive.

Method

Participants

Stratified random cluster sampling was carried out at the classroom level, in a population of approximately 37,000 students selected from the Principality of Asturias, a region in northern Spain. The students were from various public and state-subsidized secondary schools and vocational training centres, as well as from a range of socio-economic levels. The strata were created on the basis of geographical zone (East, West, and Centre) and educational stage (compulsory —to age 16— and post-compulsory), where likelihood of inclusion depended on the number of students in the school. The initial sample comprised 1780 participants, but 127 were discarded for one or more of four reasons: three points or more on the The Oviedo Infrequency scale (n = 69); being older than 19 (n = 17); failing to provide their demographic data (n = 9); and failing to respond to one or more of the administered self-reports (n = 32). Thus, the final sample was made up of 1653 participants, 794 boys (48%) and 859 girls (52%), from a total of 41 schools and 91 classrooms. The mean age was 15.94 years (SD= 1.23), with an age range of 14 to 19 years.

Instruments

The Oviedo Schizotypy Assessment Questionnaire (ESQUIZO-Q) (Fonseca-Pedrero, Muñiz, Lemos-Giráldez, Paino, & Villazón-García, 2010) is a self-report composed of 51 items in a 5-point Likert-type response format (1: «completely disagree»; 5: «completely agree») designed to assess schizotypal traits in adolescents, although it can also be used in epidemiological studies (Fonseca-Pedrero, Lemos-Giráldez, Paino, Sierra-Baigrie et al., 2009). The ESQUIZO-Q is based on the diagnostic criteria proposed in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and on Meehl’s (1962) schizotaxia model. The items of ESQUIZO-Q were selected on the basis of an exhaustive review of the literature on schizotypy (Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2008). The ESQUIZO-Q comprises a total of 10 subscales and three second-order dimensions derived
empirically by means of factorial analysis: the Reality Distortion dimension (Ideas of Reference, Magical Thinking, Paranoid Ideation and Unusual Perceptual Experiences), the Negative dimension (Physical Anhedonia and Social Anhedonia) and the Interpersonal Disorganization dimension (Odd Language and Thinking, Odd Behaviour, Lack of Close Friends and Excessive Social Anxiety). Internal consistency levels for the ESQUIZO-Q subscales ranged from .62 to .90 (Fonseca-Pedrero, Muñiz et al., 2010; Fonseca-Pedrero, Paino, Lemos-Giráldez, Vallina-Fernández, & Muñiz, 2010).

The Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS) (Reynolds, 2002) is a self-report used for assessing the severity of depressive symptomatology in adolescents between the ages of 11 and 20. It comprises a total of 30 statements with 4-point Likert-type response format (1 « almost never; 4 « nearly always »). Scores range from 30 to 120, and the cut-off point above which depressive symptomatology is judged as severe is 77 points (Reynolds, 2002). Reynolds (2002) proposed four subscales: Anhedonia, Somatic Complaints, Negative Self-Evaluation and Dysphoria. The RADS has been widely used, and has adequate psychometric properties (Maharajh, Ali, & Konings, 2006; Walker et al., 2005). In the present study, we used the Spanish version validated in a sample of non-clinical and clinical adolescents. Internal consistency and test-retest reliability ranged from .82 to .90 (non-clinical sample) and from .84 to .91 (clinical sample) (Figuera-Masip, Amador-Campos, & Peró-Caballero, 2008).

The Oviedo Infrequency Scale (INF-OV) (Fonseca-Pedrero, Lemos-Giráldez, Paino, Villazón-García, & Muñiz, 2009) is a 12-item self-report with a 5-point Likert-type rating scale format (1 « totally disagree; 5 « totally agree ») developed according to the guidelines for test construction (Schmeiser & Welch, 2006). Its goal is to detect participants who respond randomly, pseudorandomly or dishonestly in these kind of studies based exclusively on the use of self-report questionnaires. Students with 3 or more incorrect responses on this test were removed from the sample.

Procedure

The questionnaires were applied in groups of 15-25 participants who were informed of the confidentiality of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation. Written informed consent was obtained from participants and, in the case of those under 18, from their parents. Participants received no kind of incentive, monetary or otherwise. Application of the questionnaire took place under the supervision of the researchers. The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committees at the University of Oviedo, and the Department of Education of the Principality of Asturias.

Data analysis

First, the descriptive statistics for the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales were calculated. The subscales of these two self-reports have been replicated empirically by means of factor analyses in representative samples of Spanish adolescents (Fonseca-Pedrero, Muñiz et al., 2010; Fonseca-Pedrero, Wells et al., 2010). Second, we examined the Pearson correlations between the subscales of the two self-report questionnaires. Third, Canonical Correlation Analysis was conducted. This multivariate technique permits the examination of the degree of relationship between two sets of variables. The squared canonical correlation is the simple square of the canonical correlation. It represents the proportion of variance shared by 2 synthetic variables. The contribution of each variable to the canonical correlation was carried out using the standardized canonical weights. Fourth, we analyzed the dimensional structure underlying the subscales of both self-reports, using a Principal Components Analysis with subsequent Oblimin rotation. For the statistical analyses we used the SPSS 15.0 program.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the total sample referring to the mean, standard deviation, asymmetry and kurtosis values and range of scores for the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales. As it can be seen, the asymmetry and kurtosis values for the subscales are within the limits of normality.

Correlations between the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales

We examined the Pearson correlations between the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales. The results are shown in Table 2, and it can be observed that: a) the Physical Anhedonia subscale of the ESQUIZO-Q correlated negatively with the rest of subscales, and positively with the Anhedonia subscale of the RADS; b) the Social Anhedonia subscale of the ESQUIZO-Q also correlated statistically significantly with the Anhedonia subscale of the RADS.

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Asymmetry</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1.40</td>
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<td>3.22</td>
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<td>Negative self-evaluation</td>
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<td>Somatic complaints</td>
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<td>0.37</td>
<td>7-27</td>
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</table>

REF: Ideas of Reference; MAG: Magical Thinking; EXP: Unusual Perceptual Experiences; OTL: Odd Thinking and Language; PA: Paranoid Ideation; PhysAnh: Physical Anhedonia; SocAnh: Social Anhedonia; OB: Odd Behavior; LCF: Lack of Close Friends; ANX: Excessive Social Anxiety
subscale of the RADS; c) the Dysphoria subscale of the RADS correlated moderately with the Lack of Close Friends subscale of the ESQUIZO-Q; d) the Negative Self-Evaluation subscale of the RADS showed a statistically significant correlation with the Paranoid Ideation subscale of the ESQUIZO-Q; e) the Somatic Complaints subscale of the RADS correlated strongly with the Odd Language and Thinking subscale; and f) total score of the RADS correlated strongly with the Paranoid Ideation and Lack of Close Friends subscales of the ESQUIZO-Q.

Canonical correlation analysis of the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales

We next conducted a canonical correlation analysis between the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales. The canonical correlation between the subscales of the ESQUIZO-Q (canonical variate 1) and the RADS (canonical variate 2) was .69, which represents 47.61% of variance shared. The subscales that contributed with the greatest standardized weights to this relationship were, in the case of the RADS, Negative Self-Evaluation (-.53) and Somatic Complaints (-.31), while in the case of the ESQUIZO-Q, they were Lack of Close Friends (-.41) and Paranoid Ideation (-.28).

Principal Components Analysis of the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales

With the aim of examining the underlying dimensional structure and the nature of the relationships between the dimensions of the schizotypal features (ESQUIZO-Q) and depressive symptoms (RADS), we conducted a Principal Components Analysis with subsequent Oblimin rotation. The factorial weights, the eigenvalues and the percentage of explained variance are shown in Table 3. The sample adequacy measure was 7567.5 (p<.001), while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index was .89. In accordance with the scree plot and the Kaiser criterion, three components were extracted. The first component (F I) explained 35.63% of the total variance, and corresponded to the four RADS subscales and the ESQUIZO-Q subscales Lack of Close Friends, Excessive Social Anxiety, Odd Behaviour and Odd Thinking and Language. This component grouped aspects related to depressive symptomatology, cognitive disorganization and deficit in interpersonal relations, all of which are symptoms characteristic of depressed mood. It was labelled the Depressive factor. The second component (F II) explained 11.80% of total variance, and was formed on the basis of the Physical and Social Anhedonia subscales of the ESQUIZO-Q and the Anhedonia subscale of the RADS. This component was called Anhedonia. The third component (F III) explained 9.03% of total variance, and was formed on the basis of the Ideas of Reference, Magical Thinking,
Unusual Perceptual Experiences and Paranoid Ideation subscales of the ESQUIZO-Q. It was called Reality Distortion. Correlations between the components were as follows: FI-FII: .13; FI-FIII: .44; FII-FIII: .01.

Discussion and conclusions

The main goal of this study was to analyze the relationship between schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms in a community sample of adolescents. Identification of the type of schizotypal experiences most closely related to the different dimensions of depressive symptomatology is relevant, since such experiences can have different psychopathological meanings, for instance, constituting a normal variation of a state of mental health or the expression of psychosis proneness (Yung et al., 2009). Moreover, adolescence is a period of particular risk for the development of schizophrenia-spectrum and affective disorders, so that the study of the relationship between different vulnerability markers may give clues as to the etiopathogenic mechanisms involved in these types of disorders, thus contributing valuable information in relation to current models of developmental psychopathology and personality disorders models (Esterberg, Goulding, & Walker, in press).

The results of the study indicate a high degree of overlap between schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms in non-clinical adolescent populations at the subclinical level. The correlations found between the ESQUIZO-Q and the RADS were moderate and statistically significant. Examination of the relationship between the Physical and Social Anhedonia subscales of the ESQUIZO-Q revealed that they basically correlated with the Anhedonia subscale of the RADS, indicating differentiated behaviour in accordance with the facets assessed in the two constructs. For its part, the canonical correlation analysis showed that the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales shared approximately 48% of the variance. Similar data have previously been found when exploring the relationship between depressive symptoms and psychosis or schizotypal experiences in both clinical and non-clinical populations. In adolescent populations, schizotypal traits (or psychotic-like experiences) and depressive symptoms are often found to be related (Armando et al., 2010; Fonseca-Pedrero et al., in press; Scott, Martin et al., 2009; Wigman et al., in press; Yung et al., 2009). For instance, Yung et al., (2009) and Armando et al. (2010), with samples of non-clinical adolescents, found a correlation of over .50 between the positive dimension of schizotypy and depressive symptoms. Also, Fonseca-Pedrero et al. (in press) found a canonical correlation between these 2 sets of variables of .63, which represents 39.69% of the shared variance. Such overlap between the two constructs has also been found in non-clinical adults (Lewandowski et al., 2006). For example, Lewandoski et al. (2006), with a sample of American undergraduates, found a strong association between depressive symptoms and the dimensions of schizotypy — particularly the positive dimension. The phenotypical expression of the schizotypal traits and their relationship with depressive symptomatology thus appears to be similar in samples of adults and adolescents, even though in adolescent populations the overlap between the two types of characteristics is slightly greater, possibly as a result of the scarce differentiation of the adolescents’ emotional, affective and cognitive processes. These data suggest, on the one hand, the frequent coexistence of schizotypal experiences and depressive symptoms in adolescent samples of the general population and, on the other, that such overlap can be found in non-clinical samples, expanding beyond the international diagnostic criteria (e.g., DSM-IV-TR), and indicating the possible continuity between the clinical and subclinical phenotypes. In this regard, some authors indicate the possibility of a continuum between affective symptoms and psychosis (Hanssen et al., 2003; van Os, Verdoux, Bijl, & Ravelli, 1999) and highlights the role of affect in the ontogenesis of schizophrenia and related conditions (Birchwood & Trower, 2006).

The study of the dimensional structure underlying the ESQUIZO-Q and RADS subscales revealed the presence of three differentiated broad dimensions. Grouped in the first dimension were subscales related to depressive symptomatology and interpersonal disorganization; in a second dimension, subscales related to difficulty for experiencing pleasure at a physical and social level; and at a third, subscales related to the positive symptoms of the schizotypy. Although comparisons between studies are hindered by the characteristics of the sample and the measurement instrument used, previous factorial studies have found a dimensional structure — similar to that found in the present work — made up of the Positive (Reality Distortion) and Negative (Anhedonia) dimensions of schizotypy, plus an additional dimension of Depression or Negative Affect (Lewandowski et al., 2006; Stefanis et al., 2002).

Likewise, these data are in line with those of previous studies indicating that individuals presenting schizotypal experiences report higher levels of affective, cognitive, social, interpersonal and behavioural alteration (Fonseca-Pedrero, Lemos-Giraldez, Paino-Piñeiro, Villazón-Garcia, & Muñiz, 2010; Kwapiel et al., 2008; Lenzenweger, McLachlan, & Rubin, 2007; Raine, 2006; Yung et al., 2009). Thus, the alterations characteristic of patients with schizophrenia can also be found in samples of the general population below a clinical threshold, supporting the hypothesis of continuity of the psychotic phenotype (van Os et al., 2009). According to this hypothesis, schizotypal experiences would be situated at some point on this continuum, and could be seen as an «intermediate» phenotype, qualitatively similar to and quantitatively less serious than the symptomatology found in patients with schizophrenia, appearing with less intensity, persistence, frequency and associated impairment (Yung et al., 2009).

It is worth mentioning that the mere presence of these types of experiences in non-clinical populations is not a necessary or sufficient condition for developing a clinical disorder, given that the conjunction of other genetic, environmental and/or psychosocial factors is necessary (van Os et al., 2009). However, it is equally true that the coexistence of depressive symptoms and schizotypal experiences increases the risk of the subsequent development of psychotic disorders, in both high-risk and non-clinical samples (Krabbendam et al., 2005; Yung et al., 2003). Also, affective dysregulation may contribute causally to the persistence and clinical relevance of the schizotypal experiences. In this regard, depressive symptoms can be considered a relevant moderating factor influencing the transition toward a clinical condition in vulnerable individuals, so that their assessment and consideration within early detection and intervention programs could be helpful in reducing psychosis proneness, as well as the associated stress and need of care in those individuals at risk.

Our results should be interpreted in the light of the following limitations. First, the conclusions drawn are based exclusively on self-report type measures. It would have been interesting to also use external informants, such as parents or teachers. Second, this is a cross-sectional type study, so that no cause-effect inferences
can be made. Third, no information was gathered on psychiatric morbidity, medical history or on participants’ use of psychoactive substances, aspects which could be partially modulating the results obtained. Future research should continue to explore the role of depressive symptoms in the identification of individuals at risk for schizophrenia-spectrum disorders in clinical samples of adolescents, as well as using other psychological variables (Bones Rocha, Pérez, Rodríguez-Sanz, Borrell, & Obiols, 2010; Fernández-Llebrés, Godoy, & Gavino, 2010; Kirchner, Forns, Amador, & Muñoz, 2010) in combination with clinical endophenotypes (Brown & Cohen, 2010) with a view to improving predictive capacity and prevention and early intervention strategies for schizophrenia.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN) and by the Instituto Carlos III, Center for Biomedical Research in the Mental Health Network (CIBERSAM). Project references: BES-2006-12797, PSI 2008-03934 and PSI 2008-06220.

References


