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Does the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II Really Measure Experiential Avoidance?

¿El Cuestionario de Aceptación y Acción II mide realmente la evitación experiencial?

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Abstract

Experiential avoidance (EA) has played an important role in early and recent conceptualisations of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011) is largely used as a measure of EA, in spite of criticism about its validity. The present study examined the latent correlations between the AAQ-II and a new measure of EA: the Avoidance of Suffering Questionnaire (ASQ). In addition, correlations with the Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (CFQ; Gillanders, 2014) were also examined. Two hundred and forty undergraduates (59% female, M_{age} = 20.33) completed the questionnaires. Both unrestricted and restricted factor analyses were performed in order to examine the hypothesised associations. The AAQ-II showed a strong correlation with the CFQ, but a rather weak correlation with the ASQ. These results suggest that the AAQ-II may not be a measure of EA.

Keywords: *experiential avoidance, AAQ-II, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, factor analysis, validity*

Resumen

La evitación experiencial (EE) ha jugado un papel importante en las conceptualizaciones tempranas y recientes de la terapia de aceptación y compromiso. El Cuestionario de Aceptación y Acción II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011) es muy usado como una medida de la EE, a pesar de las críticas sobre su validez. El presente estudio examinó las correlaciones latentes entre el AAQ-II y una nueva medida de EE: el Cuestionario de Evitación del Sufrimiento (ASQ). Además, se examinaron las correlaciones con el Cuestionario de Fusión Cognitiva (CFQ; Gillanders, 2014). Doscientos cuarenta estudiantes universitarios (59% mujeres, M_{edad} = 20.33) completaron los cuestionarios. Se realizaron análisis factoriales no restringidos y restringidos para examinar las asociaciones hipotetizadas. El AAQ-II mostró una fuerte correlación con el CFQ, pero una correlación bastante débil con el ASQ. Estos resultados sugieren que el AAQ-II podría no ser una medida de EE.

Palabras clave: *evitación experiencial, AAQ-II, Terapia de Aceptación y Compromiso, análisis factorial, validez*

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in so-called 'third wave' cognitive-behavioural therapies (Hayes, 2004). Paramount among these, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) focuses on the acceptance of unpleasant private experiences in order to take action toward important goals (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, 2012). This approach is in line with behavioural research on language and cognition, and is part of the applied heritage of radical behaviourism (McEnteggart, 2018). Indeed, ACT has proven to be at least as effective as established treatments (A-Tjak et al., 2015), even though more research is still needed (Hacker, Stone, & MacBeth, 2016).

The initial formulation of ACT (Hayes et al., 1999) emphasised the role of *experiential avoidance* (EA), which was defined as 'the phenomenon that occurs when a person is unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences (e.g., bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, behavioral predispositions) and takes steps to alter the form or frequency of these events and the contexts that occasion them' (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996, p. 1154). Experiential avoidance has been associated with a wide range of mental health problems (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007), and is considered a transdiagnostic process of psychopathology (Spinhoven, Drost, de Rooij, van Hemert, & Penninx, 2014). However, recent formulations of ACT have replaced the centrality of EA with the *psychological inflexibility* model, of which EA is only a subprocess (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Hayes et al., 2012). Both EA and cognitive fusion—i.e. reacting to cognitive processes as if they were actual, direct experiences (Hayes et al., 2012)—are considered the core subprocesses of psychological inflexibility (Ciarrochi, Bilich, & Godsell, 2010). Moreover, they have shown a strong association with each other (Gillanders et al., 2014) and are thought to interact in the prediction of emotional problems (Bardeen & Fergus, 2016).

It has been reported that most research within ACT is done using self-report measures (Newsome, Newsome, Fuller, & Meyer, 2019). Indeed, a self-report measure, the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ) was developed to measure EA (Hayes et al., 2004). A second version, the AAQ-II, was subsequently constructed in order to overcome some of the psychometric weaknesses of the AAQ (Bond et al., 2011). The AAQ-II has been widely used in research and it has proven to have a stable factor structure, as well as to predict mental health outcomes (Renshaw, 2018). Furthermore, it has been the basis for new, context-specific versions of the AAQ (Ong, Lee, Levin, & Twohig, 2019). The first Spanish version of the AAQ-II was developed in Mexico (Patrón-Espinosa, 2010). Later, a new Spanish version was published in Spain (Ruiz, Langer-Herrera, Luciano, Cangas, & Beltrán, 2013) and its psychometric properties were examined on Colombian population (Ruiz et al., 2016). In Peru, the original Mexican version was analysed on undergraduates from Lima, replicating previous findings (Valencia & Falcón, in press).

The AAQ-II has been used for research on topics as diverse as internet addiction (Chou, Yeu, & Liu, 2018), dating violence (Shorey et al., 2014), anxiety (Tavakoli, Broyles, Reid, Sandoval, & Correa-Fernández, 2019) and problematic pornography viewing (Borgogna & McDermott, 2018; Levin, Lee, & Twohig, 2019). It has also been used in conjunction with a cognitive fusion measure in order to see how they interact in the prediction of mental health (Bardeen & Fergus,

2016). Moreover, the AAQ-II has been used to examine the potential role of EA as a mediator of change in psychotherapy research (Espejo, Gorlick, & Castriotta, 2017).

Despite the widespread use of the AAQ-II, it has been seriously criticised on the grounds that it does not adequately discriminate between EA and other constructs. One of the first authors to bring this topic into discussion was Wolgast (2014), who pointed out that the AAQ-II items tended to load on the same factor with items of emotional distress rather than with items of acceptance—supposedly, the opposite of EA. Due to such concerns, Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, and Watson (2011) developed the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (MEAQ) as a measure of EA that emphasised discriminant validity relative to neuroticism. Later, these same authors developed the Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ), a one-dimensional measure of EA (Gámez et al., 2014). A recent factorial study showed that the AAQ-II tended to be more associated with measures of neuroticism than the MEAQ (Rochefort, Baldwin, & Chmielewski, 2018). Similarly, it has been also proven that the AAQ-II has a stronger association with emotional distress than the BEAQ (Tyndall et al., 2019). Moreover, in one study, the AAQ-II's correlations with an experimental avoidance task were non-significant or very weak (Barajas, 2015). Even though the experimental task used in the aforementioned study was not designed to measure EA, this result suggests that the AAQ-II might be measuring something different from avoidance.

A recent study attempted to develop a Spanish version of the BEAQ, but failed to replicate the one-dimensional structure of the original (Valencia, 2018). Instead, this study found two possible underlying dimensions of the BEAQ, only one of which seemed to be a clear, straightforward measure of EA. This finding mirrors what is observed in other ACT-related scales. For example, the Avoidance and Fusion Questionnaire for Youth (AFQ-Y; Greco, Lambert, & Baer, 2008), another widely used measure of EA, includes both items directly related to EA (e.g. *I push away thoughts and feelings that I don't like*) and items that seem more related to depressive cognitions (e.g. *The bad things I think about myself must be true*).

The present study aimed to examine the association between the AAQ-II and a new measure of EA based on Valencia's (2018) results. In addition, the correlation between these variables and cognitive fusion was assessed. If the AAQ-II measures EA, we would expect a strong correlation between the AAQ-II and the EA measure, and a similar or somewhat weaker correlation between the AAQ-II and cognitive fusion. If, on the other hand, the AAQ-II measures something different from EA, it would show a notably weaker correlation with the EA measure than with cognitive fusion.

Method

Participants

All participants were psychology students from one public university in Lima, Peru (N = 240; 59% female). Their ages ranged from 17 to 29 years (M = 20.33, SD = 1.85) and the vast majority of them (96%) were second or third year students. Most participants (84%) were unemployed at the time of data collection. Also, most participants (89%) reported having lived in Lima for the greater part of their lives. The information about participants' places of residence roughly

coincided with known information about population distribution in Lima.

Measures

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011). The AAQ-II consists of seven items which are responded on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never true*) to 7 (*Always true*). It was originally designed to measure EA; however, its authors made the case that it was also a measure of psychological flexibility (or inflexibility), a broader and more recent concept within ACT (Bond et al., 2011). There are at least two Spanish versions of the AAQ-II (Patrón-Espinosa, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2013). In the present study, Patrón-Espinosa's (2010) translation was used in the slightly modified version of Valencia and Falcón (in press). As repeatedly shown in the literature, the best factor structure was that of a single factor with the error terms of items 1 and 4 allowed to correlate. The reliability estimate was high, even after controlling for the presence of correlated errors (ω = .87).

Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (CFQ; Gillanders et al., 2014). Cognitive fusion was measured with the CFQ, a self-report unidimensional measure. It comprises seven items, which participants are required to respond based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Never true*, 7 = *Always true*). In the present study, the Spanish translation of the CFQ was used (Romero-Moreno, Márquez-González, Losada, Gillanders, & Fernández-Fernández, 2014), as modified by Ruiz, Suárez-Falcón, Riaño-Hernández, and Gillanders (2017). This version of the CFQ has been previously tested in Peruvian undergraduates, thereby confirming its unidimensional structure and high reliability (Valencia & Falcón, 2019). Reliability was very high in our data (ω = .92).

Avoidance of Suffering Questionnaire (ASQ). The ASQ is a new Spanish measure of EA created

Table 1
Items of the newly-assembled Avoidance of Suffering Questionnaire.

Item	Source
1. One of my big goals is to be free from painful emotions. *(Una de mis metas principales es estar libre de emociones dolorosas)*	BEAQ
2. I push away thoughts and feelings that I don't like. *(Alejo los pensamientos y sentimientos que no me agradan)*	AFQ-Y
3. I rarely do something if there is a chance that it will upset me. *(Rara vez hago algo si existe alguna posibilidad de que esto me pueda perturbar)*	BEAQ
4. I try hard to erase hurtful memories from my mind. *(Trato de borrar los recuerdos dolorosos de mi mente)*	AFQ-Y
5. I work hard to keep out upsetting feelings. *(Me esfuerzo por evitar emociones desagradables.)*	BEAQ
6. I wish I could wave a magic wand to make all my suffering go away.* *(Ojalá tuviera una varita mágica para hacer que todo mi sufrimiento desapareciera)*	AFQ-Y
7. I go out of my way to avoid uncomfortable situations. *(Hago todo lo posible para evitar situaciones incómodas)*	BEAQ
8. I would give up a lot not to feel bad. *(Renunciaría a muchas cosas con tal de no sentirme mal)*	BEAQ

Note. BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2014); AFQ-Y = Acceptance and Fusion Questionnaire for Youth (Greco et al., 2008). *We replaced 'sadness' with 'suffering' in order to give the item a more general connotation.

for this study. It was constructed by assembling items from the BEAQ (Gámez et al., 2014) and the AFQ-Y (Greco et al., 2008). First, five items from the BEAQ were selected based on Valencia's (2018) study, where a subset of items were identified as better indicators of EA. These items had been previously back-translated and revised by an expert panel. Second, new items were obtained from the 'avoidance' dimension of the AFQ-Y. Specifically, three items which appeared to be clearer measures of EA were selected for inclusion in the ASQ and were directly translated into Spanish. Finally, the word *sadness* was replaced with *suffering* in one of the items, so that it had a more general meaning not specific to sad mood. Table 1 presents the items of the ASQ as they were given to participants, who were required to indicate their level of agreement with each statement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 6 = *Strongly agree*). As will be described in the Results section, items 6 and 8 were deleted in the analysis. The reliability estimate of the remaining items was adequate (ω = .82).

Procedure

Data were collected in the participants' classrooms after asking instructors for permission. All participants read an informed consent form, which stated that their participation would be anonymous and voluntary. Those who agreed to participate answered a questionnaire booklet that contained the AAQ-II, the CFQ and the ASQ. Different versions of the booklet were used, so as to vary the order in which the three measures were presented.

Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics were calculated for all indicators. Skewness and kurtosis values between -1 and +1 were considered acceptable evidence of univariate normality (Ferrando & Anguiano-Carrasco, 2010). On the other hand, multivariate skewness and kurtosis were estimated with Mardia's (1970) coefficients. Since data proved to lack multivariate normality, robust estimators were used in the following analyses.

Next, an unrestricted factor analysis was conducted with the MINRES (minimum residuals) estimator. Pairwise deletion was used for treating missing data. Three factors were extracted and they were rotated using oblimin transformation. The number of factors was determined *a priori* based on the fact that the three questionnaires were designed to measure three distinct latent variables. All items were allowed to load on all three factors. Since the ASQ is a newly-developed instrument, we intended to identify possible cross-loadings, so that we could interpret and take action upon them (e.g., through deletion).

Finally, we conducted a restricted factor analysis based on the unrestricted one. The estimator used for this analysis was MLR (Yuan & Bentler, 2000). Each item was constrained to load on only one factor. Following previous findings, the error terms of items 1 and 4 of the AAQ-II were allowed to correlate (Bond et al., 2011). As before, factor inter-correlations were freely estimated. Missing data were dealt with using the full information maximum likelihood method. The fit of the restricted model was evaluated with the comparative fit index (CFI > .95), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI > .95), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .06) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR <

Table 2
Descriptive statistics, factor loadings and correlations of the unrestricted model.

Items	M	SD	g_1	g_2	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
aaq1	2.56	1.36	0.70	-0.13	*.75*	.03	-.05
aaq2	3.01	1.35	0.41	-0.43	.29	*.40*	.05
aaq3	3.36	1.52	0.33	-0.51	*.45*	.35	.11
aaq4	2.50	1.39	0.87	0.23	*.77*	.07	-.05
aaq5	2.90	1.32	0.67	0.27	*.67*	.17	-.01
aaq6	3.15	1.54	0.30	-0.87	*.46*	.34	-.01
aaq7	2.89	1.37	0.50	-0.30	*.41*	*.42*	-.01
cfq1	2.96	1.25	0.52	-0.06	.31	*.50*	.01
cfq2	2.83	1.27	0.51	-0.19	.26	*.59*	-.02
cfq3	3.11	1.34	0.50	-0.11	.02	*.73*	.07
cfq4	2.94	1.41	0.46	-0.57	-.04	*.79*	.01
cfq5	3.21	1.51	0.45	-0.67	-.02	*.83*	.02
cfq6	3.40	1.48	0.41	-0.44	-.08	*.89*	.01
cfq7	3.13	1.44	0.32	-0.69	.13	*.75*	-.02
asq1	4.20	1.49	-0.61	-0.64	.37	-.20	*.55*
asq2	4.30	1.09	-0.62	0.20	-.22	-.06	*.63*
asq3	3.80	1.30	-0.16	-0.78	-.03	-.13	*.48*
asq4	4.17	1.24	-0.72	0.12	-.05	.00	*.81*
asq5	4.24	1.18	-0.53	0.06	-.09	.12	*.81*
asq6	3.39	1.63	0.03	-1.16	*.43*	.05	*.46*
asq7	4.21	1.20	-0.65	0.34	.09	.06	*.68*
asq8	3.23	1.42	0.15	-0.78	.38	.07	*.40*
					1		
					.68	1	
		ϕ			.17	.17	1

Note. aaq*x*, cfq*x*, and asq*x* denote indicators corresponding to the AAQ-II, the CFQ, and the ASQ, respectively. Factor loadings greater than or equal to .40 are printed in italics. g_1 = skewness, g_2 = kurtosis.

.08), in addition to the MLRχ^2, which is generally considered to be too conservative and rejecting of models that are good enough yet imperfect (Byrne, 2012). Robust versions of the CFI, the TLI (Brosseau-Liard & Savalei, 2014) and the RMSEA (Brosseau-Liard, Savalei, & Li, 2012) were used.

Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and the unrestricted factor analysis were computed using psych 1.8.12 (Revelle, 2019). The restricted factor analysis was performed in lavaan 0.6-3 (Rosseel, 2012). Both packages were run in R 3.5.3 (R Core Team, 2019).

Results

Descriptive statistics were obtained at the

item level. As shown in Table 2, all univariate skewness and kurtosis values were within the range between -1 and +1, except for item 6 of the ASQ (*I wish I could wave a magic wand to make all my suffering go away*), which showed a kurtosis value slightly below -1. On the other hand, Mardia's coefficients showed evidence of multivariate skewness ($b_{1,p}$ = 72.33, z = 2808.91, p < .001) and kurtosis ($b_{2,p}$ = 570.97, z = 10.09, p < .001), therefore signalling the lack of multivariate normality of the data.

Table 2 shows the results of the unrestricted factor analysis. As observed, the first two factors roughly corresponded to the AAQ-II and the CFQ, even though some cross-loadings were observed. Since the AAQ-II and the CFQ are well-established measures, no changes were made based on such cross-loadings. On the other hand, the third factor, which included items of the ASQ, showed two possible cross-loadings. Upon closer examination, these two items (item 6: *I wish I could wave a magic wand to make all my suffering go away*; item 8: *I would give up a lot not to feel bad*) were shown to be different in meaning from the other ASQ items, since they described hypothetical situations instead of actual EA behaviours. Based on this finding, and because the ASQ is a newly-developed measure that warrants refinement, we decided to drop these two items in the subsequent restricted factor analysis. Factor inter-correlations in the unrestricted model showed a strong association between the AAQ-II and the CFQ factors (ϕ = .68), whereas the correlation between the AAQ-II and the ASQ factor was lower in magnitude (ϕ = .17).

Next, the restricted factor analysis was performed, achieving acceptable fit: MLR$\chi^2_{(166)}$ = 247.39, p < .001; Robust CFI = .967; Robust TLI = .962; Robust RMSEA = .047, 90% CI [.034, .059]; SRMR = .072. As Table 3 shows, the correlation between the AAQ-II and ASQ latent variables was weak (ϕ = .20). On the other hand, the AAQ-II and the CFQ had a very strong correlation (ϕ = .87).

Table 3

Factor loadings and correlations of the restricted model.

Items	AAQ-II	CFQ	ASQ
aaq1	.67		
aaq2	.65		
aaq3	.78		
aaq4	.73		
aaq5	.80		
aaq6	.75		
aaq7	.78		
cfq1		.74	
cfq2		.80	
cfq3		.76	
cfq4		.76	
cfq5		.80	
cfq6		.82	
cfq7		.85	
asq1			.55
asq2			.58
asq3			.45
asq4			.79
asq5			.84
asq7			.70
	1		
ϕ	.87	1	
	.20	.20	1

Note. aaq*x*, cfq*x*, and asq*x* denote indicators corresponding to the AAQ-II, the CFQ, and the ASQ, respectively. The model also included the correlation between the errors of aaq1 and aaq4 (ϕ = .48).

Discussion

The present study showed, both in unrestricted and restricted factorial models, that the AAQ-II is more strongly correlated with the CFQ than it is with a measure of EA. Moreover, the correlation between the AAQ-II and the CFQ is so high that it is possible to state that they measure the same construct.

Previous research has cast doubt on the AAQ-II being a measure of EA. Specifically, it seems that the AAQ-II has stronger associations with other variables (i.e. neuroticism, emotional distress) than with acceptance or EA measures (Rochefort et al., 2018; Tyndall et al., 2019; Wolgast, 2014). This is exactly what we found in this study. Also, the correlation between the AAQ-II and the ASQ was very similar in magnitude to the one previously observed between the AAQ-II and an experimental avoidance task (Barajas, 2015). Moreover, it remains to be investigated whether the CFQ actually measures cognitive fusion, or if both the AAQ-II and the CFQ are measures of negative affect or neuroticism. Interestingly, some evidence suggests that the CFQ measures something different from cognitive defusion (Hadash, Lichtash, & Bernstein, 2017). If neither the AAQ-II nor the CFQ really measure the constructs they are supposed to measure, this would have important consequences for the inferences made on their basis.

If, in light of the evidence thus presented, we concluded that the AAQ-II is not an adequate measure of EA, what impact would it have on existing research? To start with, it would weaken assertions such as that the active avoidance of unpleasant private experiences is strongly related to emotional distress. It is possible that the observed association between the AAQ-II and emotional distress is due to the fact that the AAQ-II is itself a measure of emotional distress (Tyndall et al., 2019; Wolgast, 2014). Likewise, the fact that the AAQ-II has been linked to various psychological phenomena (Borgogna & McDermott, 2018; Chou et al., 2018; Levin et al., 2019; Shorey et al., 2014; Tavakoli et al., 2019) could merely reflect the fact that emotional distress is involved in them. In a similar vein, the finding reported by some studies (Espejo et al., 2017) that reductions in the AAQ-II's scores are associated with positive psychotherapy outcomes could merely reflect the fact that such interventions diminish distress in participants. Of course, it is also possible that the AAQ-II (and the CFQ for that matter) measure something different from both EA and emotional distress/neuroticism (e.g. global psychological inflexibility). However, there is still no clear evidence to make such a statement, and there remains the troubling possibility that the AAQ-II measures an outcome rather than a process.

The present study has a number of important limitations. First, results were based on a convenience sample of psychology students that are not representative of the general population. It has been shown, for example, that the association between avoidance and psychopathology is higher in clinical participants when compared to controls (Barajas, Garra, & Ros, 2017). Also, the fact that all the participants where psychology undergraduates makes it impossible to extrapolate the present results even to other university students. Second, the alternative EA measure used for this study is new and still has not gone through extensive validation. However, it is important to note that the items comprising the ASQ are themselves not new, since they were selected from two widely used measures: the BEAQ (Gámez et al., 2014) and the AFQ-Y (Greco et al., 2008). A third limitation is that only the BEAQ but not the AFQ-Y items were back-translated and thoroughly revised for creating the ASQ, which is not standard practice according to expert recommendations for test

translation (Muñiz, Elosua, & Hambleton, 2013). One final limitation that warrants mention is the fact that the unrestricted and the restricted factor analyses were both performed on the same sample. Even though it would have been desirable to have a replication sample to confirm our results, it should be noted that our approach was one of theoretical exploration. That is also the reason why we have referred to our analyses as 'unrestricted' and 'restricted' instead of 'exploratory' and 'confirmatory' (Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2000).

Future studies should continue the exploration of the AAQ-II to determine whether it measures a process (i.e. EA or psychological inflexibility), an outcome (i.e. emotional distress) or a dispositional variable (i.e. neuroticism). These studies could also benefit from the inclusion of the ASQ, as well as other measures of EA, in order to compare their performance with that of the AAQ-II. A multitrait-multimethod study would be especially enlightening to answer many of the questions here presented.

In conclusion, this study showed that the AAQ-II is more associated with a purported measure of cognitive fusion (the CFQ) than with a measure of EA. This suggests that the AAQ-II may not be measuring EA. Furthermore, it seems that the AAQ-II and the CFQ measure the same construct. Future studies should examine what this construct is, and whether it is a process, an outcome or a dispositional variable.

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