Introduction

Patients presenting anorexia nervosa (AN) and those presenting obesity (OB) express marked differences in bodily appearance and shape, but these eating disorder patients, nevertheless, share several common features. Although in some quarters the presence of OB as an eating disorder may be denied, for the purposes of the present study and based on our own psychiatric convictions OB is regarded as a disorder with eating behavioral consequences. Both groups show markedly problems, symptomatically, with food intake and eating behavior. This patient group is occupied also, in a variety of ways, with persistent thoughts concerning what to eat or not, the number of calories in-taken, slimming techniques and other related topics. Both groups of eating disorder patients are afflicted with poor physical health and accompanying complaints. Several studies have shown a U-or J-shaped relationship between Body Mass Index (BMI) and mortality, with individuals at the extremely low and the extremely high weight levels at increased risk for serious health problems (National Task Force on Prevention and Treatment of Obesity, 2001). Anorexia nervosa constitutes a psychiatric disorder with a prolonged course, severe medical and psychiatric morbidity, and often a severe extent of co-morbidity and high levels of mortality. Obesity is not considered a psychiatric disorder, but rather a medical disorder with psychopathological eating behavior since it is not associated with consistent and adaptive behaviors and psychopathological features. It is well known, however, that women suffering from obesity often present psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depressive symptoms [8-10].

Patients presenting eating, or eating-type, disorders often report alexithymia, an inability to identify and describe their emotions and affective status [11,12]. They show a paucity of words expressing feelings and demonstrate difficulties in identifying and distinguishing feeling of physical sensations. Alexithymia and personal distress seem to predict the vulnerability features of Anorexia Nervosa (AN) with higher levels of personal distress in the latter linked to poor self-regulation and emotional awareness [13]. There is a high co-morbidity between the eating disorders (Lundblad et al., 2003), AN and OB, and anxiety and/or alexithymia disorders [14], moreover, AN patients display certain features similar to those abusing substances/exercise, through a ‘narrowed’ behavioral repertoire such that weight loss, food intake restriction, and excessive exercise interfere with other activities in a similar fashion to substance/exercise abuse [15]. Further, co-morbidity between AN, anxiety, depression and psychoactive substance use has been described [16]. It is likely that the disorder elevates anxiety, depression with stress presenting a predisposing factor to poorer health-related quality-of-life and social support [17]. The core affective processes that evolve into the development and maintenance of eating disorder remain relatively unknown although the contributions of alexithymia suggest an affective basis [18].

The purpose of the present study was to compare the psychopathological features of women diagnosed with either AN or OB using well-established instruments that included Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2), Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) and the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-2). These instruments are self-administered questionnaires for adults. The women also provided information on their global functioning (GAF), according to DSM-IV, through a clinical interview. The AN patients expressed significantly more alexithymic symptoms (TAS-20), more psychological symptoms on the EDI-2 sub-scales, and lower global functioning (GAF) than the OB patients. There were no differences in depression rating or general psychopathology as measured by the BDI, SCL-90 or MMPI-2. The present results depict certain indications that the psychological health of the AN patients was more compromised than it was among the OB patients.

Research Article

Anorexia Nervosa and Obesity: A Psychological Health Comparison

Abstract

The aim of this pilot study was to compare psychopathological features and psychological health between women presenting anorexia nervosa (AN) and those presenting obesity (OB). Six AN patients (Body mass index: BMI <15) and six OB patients (BMI >40) completed Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2), Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) and the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-2). These instruments are self-administered questionnaires for adults. The women also provided information on their global functioning (GAF), according to DSM-IV, through a clinical interview. The AN patients expressed significantly more alexithymic symptoms (TAS-20), more psychological symptoms on the EDI-2 sub-scales, and lower global functioning (GAF) than the OB patients. There were no differences in depression rating or general psychopathology as measured by the BDI, SCL-90 or MMPI-2. The present results depict certain indications that the psychological health of the AN patients was more compromised than it was among the OB patients.

Participants

The patient sample consisted of six women presenting AN [19], and with a BMI range of 14.3-14.9, who were consecutively assessed at Sahlgrenska University Hospital, at a special psychiatric clinic for...
adult eating disorder patients and six women presenting OB [20], and with a BMI range of 42.0-58.7, who were assessed consecutively at the Department of Body Composition and Metabolism at the same hospital.

**Instruments**

The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – MMPI-2: The MMPI-2 is a structured personality test that assesses degree of psychopathology in terms of 10 different dimensions; hypochondriasis, depression, hysteria, psychopathic deviate, masculinity-femininity, paranoia, psycho-asthenia, schizophrenia, mania and social introversion. The test is a true-false self-report questionnaire consisting of 567 statements. The responses of each individual tested are assumed to reflect that person’s conscious self-image. The test mainly consists of clinical scales and validity scales. The validity scales measure test-taking attitude and assess whether the individual being tested took a normal, honest approach to the test. These scales allow us to see whether the subject is feigning his/her responses in any way. The test-retest reliability of MMPI-2 ranges from 0.58 to 0.91 for women. More information about the test is given in Butcher and Williams’s book from 1992 [21].

The 20 item Toronto Alexithymia Scale – TAS-20: The TAS-20, which is considered the best existing measure of alexithymia, has demonstrated good reliability and validity. Alexithymia involves difficulties in identifying and describing emotions. The three central factors of TAS-20 are:

1. “difficulty identifying feelings”,
2. “difficulty in describing feelings to others”, and
3. “externally-oriented thinking” [22].

Each TAS-20 item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale with total scores ranging from 20-100. The cut-off point for alexithymia is ≥ 61, which has been empirically established [23].

The Symptom Check List (SCL-90): The SCL-90 is a self-report instrument designed to assess general psychopathology. It contains 90 items, distributed over nine subscales, which are labelled somatization, obsession-compulsion, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety, parasomnia, psychosomatic symptoms, and general psychopathology in terms of 10 different dimensions; hypochondrias, depression, hysteria, psychopathic deviate, masculinity-femininity, paranoia, psycho-asthenia, schizophrenia, mania and social introversion. The test is a true-false self-report questionnaire consisting of 567 statements. The responses of each individual tested are assumed to reflect that person’s conscious self-image. The test mainly consists of clinical scales and validity scales. The validity scales measure test-taking attitude and assess whether the individual being tested took a normal, honest approach to the test. These scales allow us to see whether the subject is feigning his/her responses in any way. The test-retest reliability of MMPI-2 ranges from 0.58 to 0.91 for women. More information about the test is given in Butcher and Williams’s book from 1992 [21].

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The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI): Level of depression was assessed using the 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the factors of BDI are dependency, self-criticism and efficacy. BDI is a self-report instrument as well and has good validity and reliability [26].

The Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI): The EDI is a self-report instrument widely used in studying eating disorders. The Swedish version of EDI-2 (Garner, 1991; Garner & Norring, 1994) includes 91 items distributed over eleven different scales: drive for thinness, bulimia, body dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness, perfectionism, interpersonal distrust, interoceptive awareness, maturity fears, ascetism, impulse regulation and social insecurity.

The General Psychopathological Problem Inventory – SCL-90: The SCL-90 is a self-report instrument designed to assess general psychopathology. It contains 90 items, distributed over nine subscales, which are labelled somatization, obsession-compulsion, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety, parasomnia, psychosomatic symptoms, and general psychopathology in terms of 10 different dimensions; hypochondrias, depression, hysteria, psychopathic deviate, masculinity-femininity, paranoia, psycho-asthenia, schizophrenia, mania and social introversion. The test is a true-false self-report questionnaire consisting of 567 statements. The responses of each individual tested are assumed to reflect that person’s conscious self-image. The test mainly consists of clinical scales and validity scales. The validity scales measure test-taking attitude and assess whether the individual being tested took a normal, honest approach to the test. These scales allow us to see whether the subject is feigning his/her responses in any way. The test-retest reliability of MMPI-2 ranges from 0.58 to 0.91 for women. More information about the test is given in Butcher and Williams’s book from 1992 [21].

**Discussion**

Individuals presenting AN and those presenting OB display marked problems in the management of food intake and eating behaviors. Nevertheless, AN, as distinct from OB, reflects one form of eating disorder as well as a psychiatric disorder according to ICD-10 and Axis 1 in DSM-1V. The ICD-10 defines obesity as a medical condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition, expressed in eating disorder rather than a psychiatric condition.

**Table 1:** Comparisons between AN and OB patients on the TAS, BDI, SCL and GAF instruments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANorexia nervosa</th>
<th>Obesity</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDI</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCL</td>
<td>144.5</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAF</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>0.0036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U tests**
In the present study, AN patients expressed higher levels of alexithymic symptoms than the OB patients. It was observed that AN patients displayed higher levels of negative affect and negative emotions, more stress and depression, greater sleeping problems, pain, and use of analgesic drugs and mood-enhancing drugs, together with lower levels of positive affect and positive emotions but higher levels of physical activity. Regression analysis indicated that the diagnosed AN condition was predicted by negative affect, sleeping problems, use of mood-enhancing drugs exercise frequency. It was concluded that excessive exercise combined with depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive and addictive behaviors and sleep problems rendered AN representative from a perspective of multiple co-morbidities, possibly exacerbated through recurring bouts of starvation diets. It is possible also that those individuals who are unequipped to retain affective balance, through the pressures of childhood adversity, under conditions of emotional upheaval remain at risk for development of AN [37].

Limitations

Although the number of patients participating in the present study was small (n = 6), the statistical significances obtained with these result point towards some rather robust differences in psychopathology as expressed by AN and OB patients. Suffice it to say, the present findings are in agreement with those obtained previously with different samples of the patient groups.

Acknowledgments

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References


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