The Experience of Emotional Distancing in the Management of Compulsive Hoarding: A Visual Methods Approach Using the "Hoard" Acronym Tool.

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Abstract

Objective: Compulsive hoarding remains a significant public health issue, with many sufferers failing to acknowledge the problem. A number of methodological approaches have been utilised to explore and explain this complex phenomenon, though few have made use of contemporary visually inspired approaches. In an earlier study, it was found that visual methods proved beneficial in the research and subsequent treatment of compulsive hoarding, therefore a second study was designed with a specific focus on emotional distancing using the structured "HOARD" acronym tool. The findings of this study are presented in this paper.

Method: Using a participatory visual action research approach a volunteer sample of 11 participants was recruited from a therapy group for sufferers of compulsive hoarding. Participants were asked to take photographs which best reflected their hoarding problem, and reflect upon these using the "HOARD" acronym tool whilst in a neutral environment and then again in their own home.

Results: The experiences of participants were captured using semi-structured interviews, which were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Data were subject to rigorous qualitative analysis inspired by the Framework Technique.

Conclusion: Emotional distancing occurs during these reflective activities, which seems to play an important role when utilising the "HOARD" acronym tool. Three key themes emerged from the data: The evocative power of the image, Images as monitoring tools and verifying and validating the hoarding problem.

This particular methodological approach is beneficial in generating valuable narrative for self-reflection. **(Journal of Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy and Research 2013, 2: 41-46)**

Keyword: Compulsive, obsessive hoarding, ocd

Özet

Kompulsif Biriktiricilik Tedavisinde Duygusal Kaçınma Deneyimi: "HOARD" Ölçeği Aracılığıyla Görsel Yöntem Yaklaşım

Amaç: Kompulsif biriktirme bu hastalıktan muzdarip olan birçok kişinin kabullenemediği bir sağlık problemi olarak önemini korumaktadır. Bu karmaşık fenomeni anlamak ve açıklamak için birçok yöntemden faydalanılmıştır ancak çağdaş görsel yöntemler bunların pek azını oluşturmaktadır. Daha önce yapılan bir çalışmada görsel yöntemlerin kompulsif biriktirmede araştırmada ve bunu müteakip tedavide başarılı olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu yüzden "HOARD" baş harflerinden oluşmuş yapılandırılmış bir ölçeği kullanarak duygusal mesafe koymaya odaklanan ikinci bir çalışma tasarlanmıştır. Bu yazıda söz konusu çalışmanın sonuçları sunulmuştur.

Yöntem: Kompulsif biriktirmesi olan hastaların bulunduğu bir terapi grubunda 11 gönüllü, çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Katılımcılardan biriktirme problemlerini en iyi yansıtan fotoğrafları çekmeleri istenmiş ve "HOARD" ölçeğini kullanarak bu fotoğraflar üzerindeki düşüncelerini nötr bir ortamda ve kendi evlerinde ifade etmeleri istenmiştir.

Bulgular: Kaydedilmiş ve kâğıda aktarılmış olan katılımcıların deneyimleri görüşmeciler tarafından yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla gözden geçirilmiştir. Veriler Framework tekniği ile titiz bir şekilde niteliksel bir analize tabi tutulmuştur.

Sonuç: "HOARD" ölçeğini kullanma esnasında önemli rol oynadığı düşünülen duygusal mesafe kendini ifade etme eylemlerinde ortaya çıkmıştır. Verilerden 3 önemli tema açığa çıkmıştır: İmgenin hatırlatıcı gücü, takip aracı olarak imgelerin yeri ve biriktirme problemini doğrulayıp onaylamak. Bu yöntemsel yaklaşım kişinin kendini yansıtmasında değerli ifadeler ortaya çıkardığı için faydalıdır. **(Bilişsel Davranışçı Psikoterapi ve Araştırmalar Dergisi 2013; 2: 41-46)**

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kompulsif, obsesif biriktirme, okb

Introduction

Hoarding is defined by levels of clutter so excessive, that the property fails to function as originally intended leading to the physical health and safety of individual sufferers is often a major concern (Tolin et al. 2008). This condition is characterised by the accumulation and failure to discard of seemingly useless possessions (Frost and Hartl 1996). Hoarding is associated with significant impairment and impacts on the quality of life of those who are affected by this condition. In addition hoarding not only affects the individual sufferer but those who are closely associated with them such as family members and friends (Gilliam and Tolin 2010, Wilbram et al. 2008) resulting in a diminished quality of life (Saxena et al. 2011). Currently hoarding is considered as a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder within the diagnostic criteria in the DSM IV (APA 1994). However with findings from recent research studies (Pertusa et al. 2010) a new diagnostic entity of Hoarding Disorder is currently under consideration with its own provisional diagnostic criteria (www. dsm5.org) in the new DSM V (Mataix-Cols et al. 2010).

Recent studies have focussed on defining the condition and addressing the differences of this condition from the OCD spectrum of disorder (Pertusa et al. 2008). Individuals with compulsive hoarding and OCD showed a different psychological representation by the hoarding of bizarre items and the presence of other compulsions and obsessions related to their hoarding. In addition, they present with a more severe and disabling form of the disorder. However it is a condition that remains poorly understood in terms of treatment. Current treatment models have been based on Frost and Hartl's (1996) CBT model for hoarding. The model (Frost and Hartl 1996) formulates compulsive hoarding as a problem resulting from four key issues; information processing deficits, problems in forming emotional attachments, behavioural avoidance and erroneous beliefs about the nature of possessions. Recent studies have addressed treatment models in the treatment of hoarding in therapy. These treatment models include therapy sessions, home visits, motivational interviewing, decision-making training, exposure, cognitive restructuring and interventions to reduce acquisition (Hartle and Frost 1999, Steketee et al. 2000, Saxena et al. 2002, Tolin et al. 2007). More recently an innovative group based treatment of compulsive hoarding delivered via the Internet (Muroff et al. 2010).

Frost et al. (2006) developed the clutter imaging rating a visual method as a means of assessing the degree of clutter. This tool is employed to assesses the severity of the clutter within individual environments

The present study has been designed in using visual methods as a means of engaging and enhancing individuals motivation to deal with their hoarding issues.

Method

The aim of this study was to explore the experience of emotional distancing when participants used the "HOARD" acronym tool.

Ethical permission was sought and obtained to conduct the study and all participants were reassured that they could withdraw from the project at any time. Participants consented to take part and their anonymity was assured. Using a Participatory Action Research Approach (PAR) and a Visual Method Technique, 11 volunteers from a therapy group for sufferers of compulsive hoarding were recruited. In qualitative designs sample size is considered less critical, as no intention to generalise to a population is made.

Recently, some authors have suggested a minimum sample size of 6 for phenomenological studies (Mason 2010), though the authors could find so specific reference to sample size and Participatory Action Research. Sample size in studies like this, is largely left to the researcher to decide what is appropriate and manageable within the given timeframe.

Participants were asked to take photographs of images which best reflected their hoarding problem and were then asked to consider the questions contained within the "HOARD" acronym tool, when in a neutral environment such as a café or library, and then again in their own home. Participants were encouraged to use any photographic media of their choice, including mobile phones, tablets and conventional and digital cameras.

The "HOARD" acronym tool (Singh and Jones 2012)

H What has HAPPENED in this picture?
O What would you like to OVERCOME and what are your goals?
A Can you imagine lif without ALL this stuff?
R How is your life and RELATIONSHIPS affected by this problem?
D What would you like to DO about it?

Visual techniques such as this have the capacity to generate rich narrative, which can be empowering to

participants, encouraging them to disclose previously ego-defended areas (Hurworth et al. 2005).

Data were collected and digitally recorded using a visual interviewing technique. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to analysis inspired by the Framework Analysis Technique (Ritchie and Spencer 1994).

This technique is an iterative process of reading, listening, re reading, and assigning descriptive codes prior to looking for connections and formulating themes. During this phase the researcher becomes fully immersed and marinated in the data, which can contribute positively to the rigour of the analysis (Singh and Jones 2012).

Following the identification of themes and categories both researchers independently reviewed the transcripts for an evaluation of theme consistency. This is seen as a "solidifying process" in increasing rigour (Marks and McCall 2005) in addition to creating an opportunity for researchers to explore rationales for interpretative analysis and to reach consensus on final theming of the data.

Results

Three central themes and five categories emerged from the data. These are presented in tabular format for clarity (Table 1):

Discussion

In this section the researchers will offer some theoretical propositions for their findings in addition to placing the findings in the context of what is currently known about compulsive hoarding.

A previous study (Singh and Jones 2012) had concluded that visual methods were a useful approach in supporting the development of narrative in sufferers of compulsive hoarding. The present study adds further credence to this finding, noting especially the value of the "HOARD" acronym tool in exploring the impact of visual images in both home and neutral environments. This emotional distancing appears to facilitate a greater realisation and understanding of sufferers hoarding problems.

All participants commented positively on the benefits of the "HOARD" acronym tool when they reviewed their photographs in both neutral and home environments as it provided a skeletal structure in facilitating how they organised their emotional responses.

It is possible that by giving this structure, some focus and clarity of thought could have been afforded to hoarders, which would not normally have been available. This becomes especially apparent when participants declared "their minds being jumbled" in the same way as their living spaces. We suggest that the "HOARD" acronym tool therefore provided a systematic way of organising thoughts and emotions facilitating a more objective view of their predicaments. This is supported by the reporting of increased clarity of thought and an inspired motivation to sort, organise and dispose of clutter.

Furthermore, an interesting finding had associations with the concept of hope. Participants reported often feeling overwhelmed by their environment and felt that any attempts to start work on clearing and tidying would be rendered futile by the sheer volume of work to be undertaken. This perpetuated feelings of hopelessness and despondency invariably leading to low levels of motivation and failure to commence any work on reducing clutter. The revisiting of the questions highlighted within the "HOARD" acronym tool appeared beneficial in overcoming the sensations of hopelessness.

Given this benefit, the power of the visual image as a monitoring tool served to inspire hope in many of the participants in the study present study. Hope and despondency seem to be areas, which are given little consideration in research undertaken with compulsive hoarders, with emphasis perhaps being placed on more immediate physical or environmental priorities.

Photographs are powerful reminders of progress and deterioration in the physical environment and are sometimes an uncomfortable source of evidence to discourage hoarders from "letting things slip" back into old ways or habits when significant work of clearing has been achieved. Participants reported this as useful and motivating and inspiring, even if at times it generated unwelcomed emotions. The researchers are encouraged by these findings as they could find little or no specific reference to it in contemporary literature.

Notably, the evocative power of the image may also help to explain some of the disordered perceptions of the environment compulsive hoarders reported. Participants described what the researchers have labelled "orientation loss", illuminating three distinct elements. The first is an acceptance or resolution of the environment in which hoarders may live. It was reported that because they spend so much time at home in a cluttered environment sufferers fail to recognise that a problem exists and therefore perceive their living space to be deemed acceptable.

Table. 1

THEME	CATEGORY	MEANING UNIT
1.0 VALIDATION AND VERIFICATION IMPACT	1.1 Ownership of the problem	*well what I am thinking is that this is my mess I see so it is like an ownership of it*
		I realise I have deluded myself by saying I'm going to collect all of these things and sell them in my retirement years
		I wasn't t anxious or distressed by any aspect of this exercise because its my mess and because its my mess I know where everything is .t is when other people get involved as I start to realise that I don't know where everything is that's when it becomes stressful okay
	1.2 Benefit	*took lots of photographs and said there is a meeting here today and I came along after work and I quite enjoyed it but I felt that maybe I was in denial I didn't see myself as a hoarder, they hoard I collect I think the difference is I don't consider the stuff I can act as rubbish they are things of value*
		now I find it easier to prepare for people coming yes I know there is still lots to do but I can clear spaces I have a space in the corner where my computer is and that's a nice space there is still an enormous amount to do but I find I am getting used to it I realised I had to take some photographs
2.0 EVOCATIVE POWER OF THE IMAGE	2.1 Personal	*yes I had taken photographs before books in the home you shuts down and kind of to accept it outside of the home you realise it is actually an embarrassing not only for you but for other people in the home*
		I was horrified how you felt horror yes I look at the pictures and I think if I went to somebody's home and I saw that I would think they were slovenly is there anything
		a concern and what people will think about you there is perhaps an aspect of your life you would not want your colleagues to see because it is quite deceitful
	2.2 Motivational	*yes I think the only way sometimes is to pick them up and get rid of the lot I have seen myself in my minds eye doing it yes but I keep thinking I had to psych myself up*
	CATEGORY	MEANING UNIT
3.0 IMAGES AS MONITORING TOOL	3.1 Noting improvement	*so I took a photograph of the kitchen one photograph before when it was very cluttered and one afterwards when had been cleared I mean just little things there are papers piled everywhere but I am getting things sorted slowly and that's important and the next thing will be to start allowing people in*

However, when taken outside of the home to a neutral environment such as a café or library; an emotional distancing occurs, facilitating an entirely different reflection and subsequent understanding. This seems to play an important role when participants reviewed their photographs in a structured way. Many reported being physically shocked or horrified by the photographs, with most being unable to recognise entire rooms, or large parts of their homes because of the extent of their hoarded material. It is possible that camera angle, aperture priority and other media factors could have influenced their perception of the image, however the distinction between the power of the image in home and neutral environments remained distinct in this group of participants.

Further still, participants reported surprise at having "found" or "rediscovered" aspects of their environment previously submerged under hoarded items, which had been forgotten given the long periods of time involved between periods of motivation to clean and dispose of unwanted materials.

The final element of the evocative nature of the image, was an unexpected and fascinating finding from the present study; that of a loss of vibrancy and environmental colour. Once more the researchers could find no reference to this phenomenon in contemporary literature of sufferers of compulsive hoarding. Participants conveyed, not only a difficulty in identifying their environment because of large volumes of clutter, but also identified the environment as dark, dull, drab colourless and lacking vibrancy. In making reference to environments other than their own, the participants of this study recognised that colour plays a crucial part in harmonising and accentuating living space, by the use of lighting, drapes, soft furnishings such as cushions and carpets.

It is possible that many participants underestimated the impact this may have had in helping them orientate themselves in a cluttered living space, but more importantly, the researchers suspect a loss of vibrancy and colour may perpetuate depressogenic thinking and loss of motivation. Previous research has identified the effect of environmental colour on affect (Küller et al. 2006) yet it is possible that this important issue may have been underestimated when dealing with compulsive hoarders whose furnishings and lighting are often obscured by boxes, bags and other uninspiring colour.

An additional remarkable finding was the validating effect of visual images reported by our participants. Photographs were often referred to as a "harsh reality" of ownership of a problem and an acceptance that a hoarding disorder genuinely existed. The visual image is a powerful tool during phases of denial participants may experience, and it could serve as an appreciated starting point for generating narrative with perhaps newer members of a hoarding therapy group. Many participants reported that their photographs had helped them to acknowledge their problem and progress to disclosure of previously ego-defended areas, not only with therapists but also with fellow sufferers.

This was an especially important finding given that shame, guilt and embarrassment featured highly in all participants when they reflected on their photographs and stories. The notion of "seeing things how other people see it", though initially uncomfortable, appeared to empower participants to invite friends and family and fellow sufferers into their homes. The researchers viewed this as a tremendously positive step for those people who had previously lived solitary reclusive lives.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the potential value of emotional distancing when sufferers of compulsive hoarding reflect using the "HOARD" acronym tool in environments other than their own home. Despite the small sample size, the study revealed some important factors previously hidden by more traditional formal research approaches. The findings have inspired the researchers to conduct further research in the field utilising visual methodologies.

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