

# **Using Urgent States to Understand Obsessive Traits: Promoting a Phenomenological Apperception of Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder**

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## **Abstract**

A brief study in phenomenology, the present paper tries to make obsessive psychology accessible and comprehensible to clinicians and researchers. Using the example of an approaching hurricane, this work describe how obsessive thought and behavior are consistently expressed as a function of fixed traits, while, in others, obsessive thought and behavior are situationally expressed only as a function of extreme states. If not far distant and of the right magnitude, a threat, challenge or need, can temporarily elicit the anxious tension, focused attention, conscientious action, parsimoniousness, and future oriented thought common to those with an obsessive-compulsive personality organization. Recalling the state-trait debate, not only phenomenological insight, but more precise differential diagnosis and more specific etiological questions follow from using a transient imposition to gain insight into a stable disposition.

**Keywords:** Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, Personality, State-trait, Phenomenology, Subjectivity.

## **1. Introduction**

Envision a man prostrate on his couch, calmly watching television. He happens upon the news. A weather report predicts an unseasonal hurricane scheduled to appear near the man's north shore home in less than two days' time. In response to this information, his behavior changes immediately and fully. He first makes a list of what needs to be done. He turns off the television, calls his friend to cancel an excursion that had been planned for the following day, and begins to apply his energies towards the work of storm preparation. He first drives to a local hardware store and begins collecting anticipated necessities: plywood to cover the windows, sandbags to redirect water, flashlights, batteries, and perhaps a generator, and the gasoline to run it, in case of a power outage. Likewise, he goes to the grocer for the purpose of stocking up on canned goods, bottled water and other necessities to keep him provisioned during, and directly after the storm. Thereafter, he shuts the windows, raises the temperature in the house and lowers the temperature in his refrigerator, maximizing and conserving his resources. In anticipating, buying, storing and using these items, this person's entire orientation has shifted from the present and its pleasures, to the future and its threats. Anxiety

mounted; activity increased; muscles tensed, metabolic activity augmented. For this space of time, his behavior was dictated by *shoulds*, *oughts* and *musts*. Like a flashlight whose light can be more tightly concentrated, his attention narrowed, becoming more sharply focused on the storm and correspondingly less perceptive of everything else. He became more rigid and conscientious; and correspondingly less sociable and flexible.

## 1.1 Urgent States & Obsessive Traits

With the exception of some few associated features<sup>1</sup>, what has just happened is that the above-described person temporarily assumed the obsessiveness that is habitually expressed by the obsessive-compulsive personality, one of ten personality disorders recognized by the American Psychiatric Association<sup>2</sup>. An external event altered this man's internal state, making it, for a short time, more or less akin to the continuous phenomenology of an obsessive. As this tempest transformed inward psychology, so it transformed outward behavior.

## 2. Invoking Conscientiousness and Parsimoniousness

This anecdote brings forth and neatly integrates two defining signs, conscientiousness (Samuel & Widiger 2010; 2011) and parsimoniousness (Freud, 1908/1959; Gay, 1989), and two associated features, time urgency (Saltzman, 1985; Shapiro, 1999) and low openness to experience (Lynam & Widiger, 2001; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), of obsessive psychology. First, and most obviously, it touches upon obsessive conscientiousness, the hallmark sign (Hertler, 2013) of the personality pattern, which is represented by DSM-V criterion three (excessive devotion to work and productivity to the exclusion of leisure activities) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As obsessive psychology induces urgent activity in the obsessive person, imminent threat induces urgent activity in the threatened person. In both cases, activity and accomplishment become reflexive; duties and imperatives supersede desires and impulses. Neither feels able to take the weekend off, to relax, to rest. As the obsessive "may keep postponing a pleasurable activity" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) so, for a short time, does the man of this vignette. Second, the storm compels preparatory activity, potentiating the conservation of acquired resources and the accrual of new ones. This captures the obsessives' gravitation towards "details, rules, lists, order and organization" as specified by criterion one (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It simultaneously relates to the hoarding propensity denoted by criterion five and the monetary miserliness denoted by criterion seven. For a time then, the storm induces obsessive parsimoniousness. The environment is ordered and organized; resources are collected and conserved.

### 2.1 Invoking Time Urgency and Low Openness to Experience

Many associated features of obsessive personality, such as time urgency and low openness to experience, are not excepted; they too are fleetingly elicited by the hurricane. First, time urgency, though not codified as a diagnostic criterion (Hertler, 2013), is a trait repeatedly alluded to in the DSM-IV-TR and DSM-V associated features section (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; 2013). As has been previously reviewed (Hertler, 2013), the wider literature emphasizes time urgency and future oriented thought more so, with Shapiro (1999) and Saltzman (1985) as stalwart champions of this trait. Such authors note that obsessive thought is trained on the future, using today as a means of guaranteeing tomorrow. And it is this combination of future oriented thought and time urgency, so characteristic of the obsessive, that is manifested in the rapid step and the persistent activity of man in the midst of storm preparation. Very obviously, the coming of the storm changes the value of time. Where one was luxuriating in leisure, need imposes. Much is to be done; there is little time to lose. As the impending hurricane changes the value of time, so it changes time orientation. For a

short period, present is overshadowed by the future, with the former used simply as a means of guaranteeing the latter. In addition to time urgency, both state and trait induced obsessiveness perforce restrict openness to experience. The fictitious man of the aforementioned example, in coping with this urgent state, narrows his focus, seeing only the storm and the activities necessary to negate its doleful effects. Akin to the obsessive who cannot see the forest for the trees (Yovel, Revelle, Mineka, 2005), attention and focus is restricted, becoming more intently trained on a single purpose and correspondingly oblivious to all other experience. The embattled mindset that threat and need create, makes one actively scan, rather than passively absorb (Shapiro, 1999). This is true in both the literal and figurative sense. Irrespective of its being induced temperamentally or circumstantially, obsessiveness creates an attentional agenda in which global awareness is subordinated to seeking perception, and passive openness is subordinated to active intentionality. The obsessive pursues serviceable information and acts on that information (Gallagher, South & Oltmanns, 2003) and so the obsessive is described as dogmatic, opinionated, rigid (Shapiro, 1999), and lacking in openness to experience (Lynam & Widiger, 2001). As indicated in the American Psychiatric Association's associated features, the obsessive's "preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism, and mental and interpersonal control, [comes] at the expense of flexibility, openness." There is then, a direct relationship between low openness and the need for security and success, despite the source of that need.

### **3. Imminent Obligations & Impending Threats**

Imminent obligations or threats, such as the one chosen presently, are capable of imparting, not only overt signs and associated features, but the basic defining anxious temperament from which they are derived. More precisely, with the storm threatening the man and the house he lives in, there is an internal shift, bringing anxiety and tension that mimics the anxiety and tension persistently thought and felt by the obsessive (Millon & Davis, 1996). Like the man threatened by the storm, the obsessive is not panic ridden. With the storm nearly two days off and reasonable means of coping with its effects at hand, the man, like the obsessive, pre-empt the threat with activity, rather than waiting passively to suffer its effects. So, while there is tension, there is neither passive withdrawal nor debilitating anxiety. The fear, threat, duty, obligation or challenge absorbs one's focus and activate one's efforts. This variety of anxiety creates an embattled mindset and evokes a "continuous sense of purpose and effort" (Shapiro, 1999; page 44). As a result of such temperamentally manifested anxious tension, obsessives "feel harassed by responsibility and obligation" (Pollak, 1979). Obsessive anxiety creates a subjectivity "characterized by a more or less continuous experience of tense deliberateness, a sense of effort, and of trying" (Shapiro, 1999; page 31) Obsessive anxiety is, in sum, the temperamental characteristic that reliably, persistently and relentlessly evokes the preparatory activity, conscientious action, and time urgency described above. The obsessive thereby, forgoes experiential pleasure at the beckoning of obligation; obligation that is a product of mind relentlessly imposed from within, as opposed to a product of environment intermittently imposed from without. Where the man, bracing for the storm, experiences this anxious tension episodically, the obsessive saddled with such a temperament, experiences this anxious tension persistently.

### **4. Discussion**

From reading the passage and envisioning oneself in such a position, obsessive thought can be approached, obsessive feelings can be imagined, and obsessive actions can be envisioned. Not with standing its being apt, it should be explicitly noted that there is nothing singular about this example of a hurricane. Recalling an analogous situation, one in which there was a need to be fulfilled or threat to be preempted, will similarly further the phenomenological ends of this exercise. As the proffered example suggests, the recollected situation should neither be too immediate nor distant, just as it should neither impose an insuperable trial nor a trivial

stressor. The closer the scenario approximates these requirements, the more precisely it will evoke obsessive psychology. Such an exercise should contribute to the differentiation, if not differential diagnosis, of obsessive compulsive personality disorder and other disorders commonly conflated with it. Most notably obsessive compulsive personality disorder is rendered distinct from its Cluster C compeers, dependent personality disorder and avoidant personality disorder. The dependent personality, if not literally seeking refuge in the strength of another, does not actively confront threat. Likewise, the avoidant personality, if not literally seeking to avoid stressors, is not apt to actively manage them. Importantly, even if a dependent or avoidant personality did respond to the storm as did the man in the vignette, neither approaches life in such a manner. Though all three Cluster C personalities share an anxious and fearful disposition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) that seems to derive from similar genetic underpinnings (Joyce et al., 2003), only the anxiety of the obsessive-compulsive personality seems to inspire a counter-phobic reaction. Where the anxiety of the avoidant and dependent motivates passivity, the anxiety of the obsessive motivates activity. Similarly, entering into obsessive psychology through this thought experiment strongly differentiates obsessive compulsive personality disorder from the eponymously similar obsessive compulsive disorder. Obsessive compulsive disorder is not, like the obsessive personality and the man facing the hurricane, associated with extreme conscientiousness or a global sense of time urgency, as it is not associated with accomplishment or wide-ranging activity; rather, obsessive-compulsive disorder is much more confined, being defined by a specific fear, or set of fears, and the compulsions that allay them.

The distinction between trait and state based anxiety, so long made (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970), continues to be the subject of research (Endler & Kocovski, 2001) and measurement (Spielberger, 1985; Marteau & Bekker, 1992). In recalling and invoking this instructive dichotomy, it remains possible to gain new insight into foreign psychological organizations, such as obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. Though approximately ninety-five percent of the population does not express an obsessive personality, with an urgent state imposed, obsessive psychology can be temporarily occupied and partially understood. This fictive example of a hurricane has the potential to serve as a teaching tool, specifically helping graduate students in clinical psychology, and medical students in psychiatry, better understand the phenomenology of obsessive personality. More than this, practicing clinicians can use this brief exercise to enter into the subjectivity of this subset of patients, while diagnosticians might find this exercise an aid in differential diagnosis. Finally, for all parties, this exercise serves the function of stratifying obsessive features, showing anxious tension to be archetypal organizing principle of obsessive personality, which, though covert and temperamental, actuates all overt and behavioral symptoms.

If this perspectival exercise helps clinicians and researchers temporarily enter into an obsessive mindset, it does not explain the reasons for that mindset. The question that remains is why: Why is obsessive urgency ever present and psychologically omnipresent? Why is obsessive anxious tension a fixed temperamental feature dissociated from any impending threat? Why do obsessives display extreme conscientiousness, preparatory activity and time urgency in the absence of any necessary goal or immediate end? In other words, why do obsessives exhibit obsessive traits in the absence of urgent states? These are complicated questions of etiology, but they are more pointed, and perhaps more easily answered, than generally asking, *why does the obsessive personality exist?* In this small way, by focusing the etiological search, understanding that obsessive traits can be mimicked by urgent states furthers the search for ultimate etiological answers. Paired with the knowledge that obsessive personality is highly heritable (Torgersen et al., 2000), we might then look for the environmental challenges that selected for temperamental obsessive anxiety<sup>3</sup>.

## Notes

1. This urgent state, while it situationally invokes many of the core behavioral and temperamental characteristics of obsessive personality, does not invoke some of its associated features. For example, it does not alter one's orientation towards authority, making one like an obsessive in being either exceptionally deferential to, or exceedingly contemptuous of, authority. Most importantly though, it does not invoke the morality of the obsessive, which is denoted by criterion four: "over-conscientious, scrupulous, and inflexible about matters of morality, ethics, or values" (American Psychiatric Association).
2. Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder was originally classified in 1952 with the American Psychiatric Association's publication of the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This is a life-long pattern inseparable from person and personality, characterized by the following symptoms: "is preoccupied with details, rules, lists, order, organization, or schedules to the extent that the major point of the activity is lost; shows perfectionism that interferes with task completion; is excessively devoted to work and productivity to the exclusion of leisure activities and friendships; is over-conscientious, scrupulous, and inflexible about matters of morality, ethics, or values; is unable to discard worn-out or worthless objects even when they have no sentimental value; is reluctant to delegate tasks or to work with others unless they submit to exactly his or her way of doing things; adopts a miserly spending style towards both self and others; money is viewed as something to be hoarded for future catastrophes; shows rigidity and stubbornness" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This pattern was first labeled *anal character* by Freud (Freud, 1908/1959) and is also sometimes referred to as *anankastic personality* (Pfohl & Blum, 1991).
3. Obsessive personality is thought to be strongly influenced by genes and is noted to have a heritability index of 0.78 (Torgersen et al., 2000; Reichborn-Kjennerud et al., 2007, Hertler, 2014a; 2014). At the same time, psychoanalytic models have not been supported (Pollak, 1979; 1987), and parental influence has been described as exceedingly limited (Torgersen et al., 2000; Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2007). In consequence, an evolutionary model was suggested (Hertler, 2014a), sketched (2014b) and expounded (2014c). This model, using an ecologically-driven evolutionary paradigm, seems most able to explain the persistent trait-based urgency of obsessive personality herein described.

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