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Assessments of subjective cognitive complaints: Whose reports should we rely on – participant versus informant?

Quoc Cuong Truong
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Objectives: Older adults often report Subjective Cognitive Complaints (SCC), which relate to an individual's self-experience of cognitive deterioration and contribute to the criteria for a diagnosis of Mild Cognitive Impairment. SCC can be self-reported or reported by informants (family member or friend) who are close to the individual with the advantage of quickly and easily capturing daily cognitive and memory changes that standardized neuropsychological tests may not detect. However, no empirical examination was conducted to date using an appropriate methodology to investigate whose reports (i.e., participants' or informants') are more reliable, and at what stage researchers and clinicians should rely on which reports.

The aim of this study was to investigate the reliability of two widely used SCC assessment tools, the self-reported Memory Complaint Questionnaire (MAC-Q) and the Informant Questionnaire on Cognitive Decline in the Elderly (IQCODE).

Methodology: Generalizability theory was applied to SCC assessment scales using longitudinal measurement design with five assessments spanning 10 years of follow-up.

Findings: The IQCODE demonstrated strong reliability in measuring enduring patterns of SCC with G=0.86. Marginally acceptable reliability of the 6- item MAC-Q (G=0.77-0.80) was optimized by removing one item resulting in G=0.80-0.81. Most items of both assessments were measuring enduring SCC with exception of one dynamic MAC-Q item. The IQCODE significantly predicted global cognition scores and risk of dementia incident across all occasions, while MAC-Q scores were only significant predictors on some occasions.

Conclusion & Significance: While both informants (IQCODE) and self-reported (MAC-Q) SCC scores were generalizable across sample population and occasions, self-reported (MAC-Q) scores may be less accurate in predicting cognitive ability and diagnosis of each individual.

e: quoccuong513@yahoo.com