Somatoform disorders and causal attributions in patients with suspected allergies: Do somatic causal attributions matter?

Abstract:
Somatic causal illness attributions are being considered as potential positive criteria for somatoform disorders (SFDs) in DSM-V. The aim of this study was to investigate whether patients diagnosed with SFDs tend towards a predominantly somatic attribution style. We compared the causal illness attributions of 48 SFD and 149 non-somatoform disorder patients, in a sample of patients presenting for an allergy diagnostic work-up, and those of 47 controls hospitalised for allergen-specific venom immunotherapy. The SFD diagnosis was established by means of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV. Both spontaneous and prompted causal illness attributions were recorded through interview and by means of the causal dimension of the Revised Illness Perception Questionnaire (IPQ-R), respectively. Patients' spontaneous and prompted responses were assigned to a psychosocial, somatic, or mixed attribution style. Both in the free-response task and in their responses to the IPQ-R, SFD patients were no more likely than their nonsomatoform counterparts to focus on somatic explanations for their symptoms. They were just as likely to make psychosocial or mixed causal attributions. However, patients with SFDs were significantly more likely to find fault with medical care in the past. Our data do not support the use of somatic causal illness attributions as positive criteria for SFDs. They confirm the dynamic and
multidimensional nature of causal illness attributions. Clinical implications of these findings are discussed.