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Effects of positive affect on risk perceptions in adolescence and young adulthood[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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Affective influences may play a key role in adolescent risk taking, but have rarely been studied. Using an audiovisual method of affect induction, two experimental studies examined the effect of positive affect on risk perceptions in adolescence and young adulthood. Outcomes were risk perceptions regarding drinking alcohol, smoking a cigarette, riding in a car with a drunk driver, getting into a fight, and having unprotected sexual intercourse. Study 1 showed that positive affect led to lower risk perceptions than neutral affect for young adults (mean age 23). Study 2 replicated the effect for early adolescents (mean age 13), mid-adolescents (mean age 17), and young adults (mean age 23). Moreover, Study 2 showed that the effect was most pronounced at high levels of impulsiveness. Adolescents and young adults may be more risk averse in contexts that do not give rise to emotions, but have markedly lower risk perceptions under positive affect.

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Binge drinking, deviant behavior, and reckless driving are risk behaviors that peak in adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Steinberg, 2007, 2008). However, empirical studies have repeatedly shown that adolescents have cognitive capacities quite similar to adults and are sometimes even more risk averse (e.g., Beyth-Marom, Austin, Fischhoff, Palmgren, & Jacobs-Quadrel, 1993; Boyer, 2006; Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002; Quadrel, Fischhoff, & Davis, 1993). One explanation for these conflicting findings is that “the factors that lead adolescents to engage in risky activities are social and emotional, not cognitive” (Steinberg, 2008, p. 3). This suggests an experimental investigation of social and affective influences on adolescent risk taking, but, to date, few studies have done so. A notable exception is an experiment (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005), which demonstrated that the mere presence of peers led to marked increases in risk taking, particularly in adolescents (for another experimental study see Ganzel, 1999). Yet, as noted by Rivers, Reyna, and Mills (2008), research on the role of affect in adolescent risk taking is scarce. To our knowledge, effects of positive affect on adolescent risk perception – a widely studied cognitive aspect of risk taking (for a review see Boyer, 2006) – have not been examined to date. This was the starting point for the present article.

Effects of positive affect on risk perceptions

Affect can profoundly alter cognition (e.g., Forgas, 2008; Hastie, 2001; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003; Peters, Västfjäll, Gärling, & Slovic, 2006; Rivers et al., 2008). Specifically, positive affect can lead to positive cognitions, even if it stems

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from completely incidental sources (cf. Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Put differently, happy feelings can bring about happy thoughts. Major theories have predicted this effect including the affect priming theory (e.g., Bower, 1981; Bower & Forgas, 2000) and the mood-as-information model (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 2003); and numerous empirical studies have demonstrated it (for a review see Forgas, 2008). One explanation, put forth by the affect priming theory, is that positive affect functions as a prime for positive cognitions. Another explanation, postulated by the mood-as-information model, is that individuals ask themselves “How do I feel about it?” and erroneously use their current affect as valid information to guide their thoughts. In this article, we draw from the affect infusion model (e.g., Forgas, 2002, 2008), which integrates both models and, moreover, specifies conditions under which affect “infuses” cognition and under which it does not.

Risk perceptions are a widely studied cognitive aspect of risk taking (Boyer, 2006). Studies have shown that positive affect indeed leads to lower risk perceptions (e.g., Johnson & Tversky, 1983), although not all of them have confirmed this effect (e.g., Isen & Geva, 1987). One possible reason is that not all individuals may change their risk perceptions under positive affect. Only some with certain personality characteristics may do so. This assumption builds on the affect infusion model (Forgas, 2002). Research on personality characteristics as moderators of affect-cognition effects is still rare, but previous studies show that individuals who are open and pay attention to their feelings are most influenced by them (Ciarrochi & Forgas, 2000; Gasper & Clore, 2000). From a developmental perspective, personality characteristics are particularly interesting as they may help to identify individuals who are particularly vulnerable to affective influences when thinking about risk.

The present studies

Previous studies show that risk perceptions can be profoundly altered by positive affect (e.g., Gasper & Clore, 2000; Johnson & Tversky, 1983). These studies came from disciplines outside the developmental sciences and were mostly conducted with college students. Thus, it is unknown whether positive affect leads to lower risk perceptions regarding risk behaviors typically studied in developmental research. Moreover, it is unclear whether the effect generalizes to adolescents. Finally, little is known about personality characteristics that moderate the effect. We conducted two experimental studies to investigate these questions.

In Study 1, we examined the effect of positive affect on risk perceptions regarding risk behaviors typically studied in developmental research in a sample of young adults. Previous studies examined effects of positive affect on risk perceptions regarding financial risks (Isen & Geva, 1987), uncontrollable risks such as accidents (Johnson & Tversky, 1983), or other events (Gasper & Clore, 2000). We were interested in risk perceptions regarding risk behaviors such as substance use, driving with a drunk driver, getting into a fight, and having unprotected sexual intercourse, which may involve short-term rewards, but can cause serious harm to self and others (e.g., Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002). Drawing from the converging prediction of major affect-cognition theories (Bower & Forgas, 2000; Forgas, 2008; Schwarz & Clore, 2003), we expected positive affect to lead to lower risk perceptions.

In Study 2, we sought to replicate this effect for early adolescents, mid-adolescents, and young adults. Previous studies focused exclusively on young adults, but it is unclear whether the findings generalize to adolescents (Rivers et al., 2008). Neurobiological findings show that adolescence is a developmental period during which subcortical systems related to affective functioning are disproportionately activated while top-down control systems are not yet fully developed (e.g., Galvan et al., 2006; for a review see Steinberg, 2008). These brain remodeling processes may continue well until young adulthood (Giedd, 2008). Study 2 involved early adolescents, mid-adolescents, and young adults. We expected positive affect to lead to lower risk perceptions in all age groups.

Moreover, in Study 2, we examined impulsiveness and sensation seeking as moderators of the effect of positive affect on risk perceptions. Both personality characteristics have repeatedly been linked to risk behavior (e.g., Boyer, 2006; Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993; Stanford et al., 2009; Steinberg et al., 2008). Drawing from the affect infusion model (e.g., Forgas, 2002) and previous studies showing that individuals who are open and pay attention to their feelings are most influenced by them (Ciarrochi & Forgas, 2000; Gasper & Clore, 2000), we expected a similar effect for individuals with low self-regulatory control. That is, we expected positive affect to lead to particularly low risk perceptions for adolescents and young adults with high impulsiveness or high sensation seeking.

In both studies, we used an audiovisual method to induce affect. Specifically, we created video clips combining norm-rated pictures from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 2005) with instrumental music from movie soundtracks. Audiovisual methods of affect induction have proven effective in previous research (Gross & Levenson, 1995; Hewig et al., 2005). After the affect induction, participants were presented an adapted version of the Benthin Risk Perception Measure (Benthin, Slovic, & Severson, 1993), following the example of other studies (e.g., Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Magar, Phillips, & Hosie, 2008; Steinberg, 2004). Participants rated their risk perceptions regarding five risk behaviors (i.e., drinking alcohol, smoking a cigarette, riding in a car with a drunk driver, getting into a fight, and having unprotected sexual intercourse).

In Study 2, we added a negative affect condition for exploratory purposes. As shown by Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister (2001), negative affect can lead to higher risk taking as individuals try to repair their bad mood by engaging in activities that are rewarding in the short run (but potentially harmful in the long run). Many risk behaviors provide such short-term rewards. We explored the possibility that not only positive but also negative affect would lead to lower risk perceptions compared to neutral affect.

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