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Personality and Individual Differences 40 (2006) 1409–1419

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Unique and interactive effects of neuroticism and effortful control on psychopathological symptoms in non-clinical adolescents

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Received 31 May 2005; received in revised form 23 November 2005; accepted 13 December 2005
Available online 2 February 2006

Abstract

The present study examined effects of neuroticism and effortful control on a broad range of psychopathological symptoms in youths. Non-clinical adolescents aged 12–15 years ($N = 173$) completed self-report questionnaires for measuring neuroticism, effortful control, and psychopathological symptoms. Results showed that the links between neuroticism and effortful control, on the one hand, and psychopathological symptoms, on the other hand, were as expected. That is, correlations between neuroticism and symptoms were positive, whereas those between effortful control and symptoms were negative. Furthermore, neuroticism and effortful control both explained unique and significant proportions of the variance in psychopathological symptoms. Finally, an interactive effect of neuroticism and effortful control on psychopathological symptoms was found. In particular the combination of high levels of neuroticism and low levels of effortful control was associated with high levels of psychopathological symptoms.

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Keywords: Neuroticism; Effortful control; Psychopathological symptoms; Adolescents

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1. Introduction

Prevalence studies have shown that up to one quarter of youths suffer from a psychiatric disorder at some point in time during their childhood (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003). The most frequently diagnosed disorders can be divided into two broad categories, namely emotional disorders such as anxiety disorders, depression, and eating disorders, and behavioral disorders such as disruptive behavior disorders and substance use disorders (see also Ford, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2003). Whereas it is clear that most types of child psychopathology are the result of a dynamic interplay of various vulnerability and protective factors, it is generally acknowledged that temperament is involved in this process. Most research attention has been devoted to the temperamental trait of neuroticism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; also known as emotionality or negative affectivity), which is generally considered as an important vulnerability factor to psychiatric problems in youths (see Calkins & Fox, 2002; Lonigan & Phillips, 2001; Muris & Ollendick, 2005). The current article argues that the regulative temperament factor of effortful control also plays a critical role in the manifestation of child psychopathology.

Several studies have shown that neuroticism is implicated in the etiology of child psychopathology, including emotional as well as behavioral disorders (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Rabasca, & Pastorelli, 2003; Ehrler, Evans, & McGhee, 1999; Huey & Weisz, 1997; John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994; Muris, Meesters, & Diederens, 2005; Muris, Winands, & Horselenberg, 2003). Several theories have been formulated on the issue of why youths who are characterized by high levels of neuroticism are more prone to develop psychopathological symptoms (see for a discussion Ormel, Rosmalen, & Farmer, 2004). Briefly, it can be hypothesized that neurotic individuals either have dysregulated physiological systems (Eysenck, 1967; Gray, 1987, 1991; see also Gray & McNaughton, 2000) or display distorted cognitive/information processing patterns (Eysenck, 1992), which predispose them to show strong emotional reactivity and instability when confronted with threatening and stressful life events.

It is important to note that the contribution of temperament to the etiology of child psychopathology should not merely be viewed as a reactive process guided by the temperament factor of neuroticism. In the past five years, an increasing amount of research has focused on ‘effortful control’, which is viewed as a regulative temperament factor that enables children and adolescents to modulate their emotional reactions (e.g., Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2004). Effortful control can best be defined as “the ability to inhibit a dominant response to perform a subdominant response” (Rothbart & Bates, 1998). Clearly, this definition is quite abstract and suggests that effortful control pertains to ‘controlling’ or ‘regulating’ behavior under certain circumstances. However, it should be borne in mind that effortful control not only pertains to behavioral control but also attention control processes. More specifically, effortful control is generally thought to consist of two important components: inhibitory control, which pertains to the ability to inhibit one’s behavior if necessary, and attention control, which can be defined as the ability to focus and shift attention as needed.

Current temperament researchers assume that temperamental vulnerability to psychopathology is characterized by high levels of neuroticism and low levels of effortful control (Calkins & Fox, 2002; Lonigan & Phillips, 2001; Muris & Ollendick, 2005). A handful of studies have actually examined the role of neuroticism and effortful control in the etiology of child psychopathology. In an investigation by Eisenberg and colleagues (2001), parents and teachers completed rating

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