



The interaction between neuroticism and gender influences the perceived availability of social support

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the degree to which neuroticism and gender interact to influence the perceived availability of social support. Three-hundred and sixty-six participants completed measures assessing perceived social support and personality. Correlation and hierarchical regression analyses showed that these two dimensions interacted to predict perceived support. That is, at low levels of neuroticism, females, relative to males, reported greater overall support, and greater appraisal support. However, as neuroticism levels increased, measures of perceived social support converged for females and males, such that at the highest levels of neuroticism, there were no gender differences in general perceived social support or appraisal support. These findings may help to address some of the inconsistencies that have been reported in the literature concerning the relationship between neuroticism and perceived availability of social support.

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1. Introduction

The trait of neuroticism has been related to a number of negative life outcomes, including health complaints, poor self-esteem, and low levels of life satisfaction (Harkness, Bagby, Joffe, & Levitt, 2002; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002). Neuroticism also has been negatively associated with measures of social support. In particular, the form of social support that neuroticism seems to be most strongly related to is perceived availability of social support (Swickert, 2009), with correlations between these two constructs ranging from $-.3$ to $-.5$ (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Finch & Graziano, 2001; Lakey, Adams, Neely, Rhodes, Lutz, & Sielky, 2002; Russell, Booth, Reed, & Laughlin, 1997). However, not all studies have found a strong relationship between these two variables (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003; Halamandaris & Power, 1997; Tong et al., 2004). Although it remains unclear as to what is accounting for this inconsistency, circumstantial evidence suggests that the variable of gender might be influencing the results of these studies. That is, in those studies where the findings were analyzed separately by gender, a stronger relationship was found between neuroticism and perceived social support for females than for males (Dehle & Landers, 2005; Katainen, Rääkkönen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 1999; Kitamura et al., 2002; Swickert, 2009). As such, it appears that the trait of neuroticism might be differentially influencing females' and males' perception of the level of social support that is available to them.

However, as far as we can ascertain, no one has systematically examined whether neuroticism and gender might interact to influence levels of perceived social support. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine this issue.

So, how is it that neuroticism and gender might interact to predict perceived support? To address this question, we first need to understand how neuroticism and gender are each related to perceived social support. Neuroticism is characterized by one's level of emotional stability. Individuals high in neuroticism tend to be more irritable, anxious, moody, and depressed, whereas those low in neuroticism tend to be more calm and relaxed (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). One implication of this emotionality is that the quality of one's social interactions can be greatly impacted, with those high in neuroticism reporting lowered levels of relationship satisfaction than those low in this dimension (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Möller, 2004; White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004). Lowered relationship satisfaction, in turn, is predictive of reduced levels of perceived social support (Kaul & Lakey, 2003). As a result, individuals high in neuroticism, as compared to those who are low, often feel that they do not have people they can turn to in times of need.

Regarding the relationship between gender and perceived social support, both biological and social role models suggest that females are more likely to seek out social support than are males (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Reeve, 2007; Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenwald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000). From a biological perspective, researchers have argued that the circulating hormone oxytocin, in combination with other female reproductive hormones, contributes to females' need to "tend-and-befriend" as a response

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to environmental stressors. This tendency toward affiliation is believed to have an adaptive advantage for females as well as their offspring, as it means that there is a network of support available to them during times of stress. Socialization processes also are believed to play a role in explaining the differential use of social support by females and males (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). As part of their gender sex role, females are expected and encouraged to turn to others for help and support when coping with problems. However, support-seeking behavior on the part of males is often discouraged because it is perceived to signify weakness. As a result of these genetic and environmental factors, females are likely to perceive greater social support available to them than do males during times of stress (Prezza & Pacilli, 2002; Robinson, 1995).

Drawing upon this extant literature which has shown significant bivariate relationships between neuroticism and perceived social support, and gender and perceived social support, it seems reasonable to predict that neuroticism and gender may interact to influence perception of social support. Because females and those lower in neuroticism tend to have stronger ties to their social support group, the perception of support available to them would most likely be higher than males and those high in neuroticism. So by combining these two constructs, it is predicted that females who are low in neuroticism would report the greatest level of perceived support, and males who are high in neuroticism would report the lowest level of perceived support.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three-hundred and sixty-six subjects were recruited from a medium-sized liberal arts college located in the southeastern region of the United States. Two-hundred and forty-nine participants were female and 117 were male. Age of the subjects ranged from 18 to 53, with the majority of participants (81.8%) falling between 18 and 26 years old. In regards to race, 14% identified as black, 80.2% white, and 5.9% identified themselves as other.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Social support

In order to measure subjects' perceived social support, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was administered. The ISEL is a questionnaire consisting of 48 items that assess four types of social support. The four types of perceived social support measured are appraisal (having someone to talk with about their problems), belonging (having people to do things with), self-esteem (having a positive comparison when comparing oneself to others), and tangible (having someone to provide material aid). The subject is given statements concerning the availability of each type of social support, and must indicate whether they are mostly true or false. The subject receives an individual score for every type of perceived social support, and all of these scores are summed to produce the total score. Higher scores on this scale indicates a higher level of perceived social support. In the current study, internal consistency was shown to be adequate, with alphas of .85 for the total ISEL, .72 for Appraisal, .70 for Belonging, .60 for Self-esteem, and .64 for Tangible. Additional psychometric information about this measure can be found in Cohen and Hoberman (1983).

2.2.2. Personality

The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) was employed to measure participants' personality. The NEO-FFI assesses agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroti-

cism, and openness. A five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) is used to respond to 60 items. Each personality factor consists of 12 items and higher levels of a personality factor are associated with higher scores. Regarding internal consistency of the neuroticism scale in the present study, $\alpha = .88$. The NEO PI-R manual contains a report of the test-retest reliability and construct validity for this test (Costa & McCrae, 1992b).

2.2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate computer science and psychology college classes. Participants were tested in groups and each subject filled out a consent form and was given a packet of materials to complete, including the ISEL, NEO, and a demographic questionnaire. Upon completing the survey materials, subjects were thanked for their participation. Students received course credit for their participation.

3. Results

Prior to hypothesis testing, all variables were screened for normality and those variables that were found to be skewed (i.e., Appraisal subscale, Belonging Subscale, and the ISEL total scale), were transformed using a log procedure. Given that neuroticism is a continuously scaled variable, correlation and hierarchical multiple regression procedures were used to analyze the data. Because of the hypothesized reticular arousal influences of extraversion on neuroticism (Eysenck, 1967), all analyses involving neuroticism were controlled for extraversion. Similarly, because age has been shown to influence perceived social support (Coventry, Gillespie, Heath, & Martin, 2004), this variable was controlled for as well. Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations of the study variables, as well as the partial correlations between these variables. Regarding these findings, gender was modestly but significantly associated with the ISEL subscales of Appraisal, Self-esteem, and Tangible. Interestingly, these associations were of opposing directions for females and males. That is, females reported greater Appraisal and Tangible support than did males, but males perceived greater levels of Self-esteem support than did females. Neuroticism was negatively related to all forms of perceived support. Essentially, those with higher levels of neuroticism reported lower overall perceived support, as well as lower levels of appraisal, belonging, self-esteem, and tangible support. Finally, gender was negatively correlated with neuroticism, with females reporting greater levels of neuroticism than did males.

Regarding the hierarchical regression analyses, extraversion and age served as control variables so they were stepped into the equation first. The second step of the model included the main effects of neuroticism and gender. Finally, the interaction term between neuroticism and gender was entered as the third step of the model. This procedure was followed for the ISEL total scale score as well as the four subscales of this instrument. Table 2 lists the findings from these analyses. Similar to the correlational findings, neuroticism showed significant main effects for the ISEL total and all four subscales. Gender was significantly related to the appraisal and tangible subscales, with females reporting greater perceived support in these areas. Significant interaction effects were also found between neuroticism and gender for the ISEL total scale and the appraisal subscale. A marginally-significant interaction effect also was found for the self-esteem subscale. To probe the two significant interaction effects, we split the neuroticism variable into three categories (low, medium and high), and then graphed the means of the ISEL total scale and the appraisal subscale (see Figs. 1 and 2, respectively). As can be seen in the graphs, for both effects females and males who were low in neuroticism differed the most in terms of perceived social support. However, as neuro-

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