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Age and gender differences in negative affect—Is there a role for emotion regulation?

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Abstract

Elderly people report less negative affect than the young, and women report more negative affect than men. This study investigated whether age and gender differences in negative affect could be explained by emotion regulation, measured as defensiveness and rumination, while controlling for the influence of life events. One-hundred-and-ninety-five young (20–35 years) and 302 elderly (70–85 years) men and women completed the Emotional Control Questionnaire-Rehearsal, Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale, Profile of Mood States, Beck's Depression Inventory and List of Recent Experiences. Hierarchical regressions with negative affects as dependent variables showed that age was reduced to non-significance when controlling for defensiveness, and gender was reduced to non-significance when controlling for the interaction between age and gender, which in turn was reduced when entering rumination. Life events also influenced the association between age and negative affect. The results indicate that age differences in negative affect are mediated by defensiveness and life events and that when these two influences are accounted for elderly people score higher on sadness. Gender differences in negative affect were due to the young women's higher scores on negative affect and this is partly explained by rumination.

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1. Introduction

The elderly have often been found to report less negative affect than the young (Gross, Carstensen, Tsai, Skorpen, & Hsu, 1997; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998) and women have been found to report more negative affect than men (Costa et al., 1987; Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991). These group differences in negative affect could arise from differences in life events and/or emotion regulation strategies. In the present study we tested whether rumination and defensiveness mediated age- and gender differences in negative affect, while controlling for life events.

Rumination is defined as conscious, spontaneous, recurrent thoughts and/or images about past negative information. Rumination has shown positive associations with negative affect, like depression, anxiety and anger (Thomsen, *under review*) and may be viewed as an emotion regulation strategy that increases negative affect through cognitive focus (Gross, 1999).

Defensiveness has been measured using social desirability scales (Paulhus, 1984). While early interpretations of the scales were based upon the individual's tendency to consciously skew their reports in order to create a good impression, later interpretations emphasize the self-deceptive aspect of the scales (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). In this way, defensiveness can be viewed as an attempt to down-regulate negative affect (Gross, 1999), and has shown inverse correlations with anxiety, sadness, depression and anger (Barrett, 1996; Clark, Crewdson, & Purdon, 1998; Marlowe & Crowne, 1960).

1.1. Age and gender differences in negative affect

The elderly have often been found to score lower on negative affect than younger individuals in cross-sectional studies (Gross et al., 1997; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). Longitudinal studies show mixed evidence (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Costa et al., 1987) possibly depending on the length of the follow-up period. Another commonly noticed age difference in negative affect is that elderly depressed patients more often display “masked” or “atypical” depression, which refers to the finding that the elderly often complain more of somatic problems and sleep disturbances while not reporting sadness (Mulsant & Ganguli, 1999; Rosenberg, Wright, & Gershon, 1992). Theorists argue that the elderly often have poorer health than younger people and that this explains the “over-reporting” of somatic symptoms (Mulsant & Ganguli, 1999). Alternatively, the “over-presence” of some symptoms, especially sleep problems, may be an integrated part of a natural aging process (Rosenberg et al., 1992). However, another possibility is that the elderly express fewer affective depressive symptoms because of their generally lower levels of negative affect.

Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory may account for the age differences in negative affect, since it suggests that elderly individuals learn to maximize positive emotions while minimizing negative emotions to increase present well-being (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Thus, the elderly are thought to have more efficient emotion regulation than younger individuals, and this has been supported in self-report studies (Gross et al., 1997). Carstensen et al. (1999) emphasize efficient emotion regulation as a maturational process thus indicating a positive development of emotion regulation strategies. However, the elderly may use emotion regulation strategies, which are generally thought of as less adaptable, like defensiveness, and studies have

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