



Sources of variation in emotional awareness: Age, gender, and socioeconomic status



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined associations between emotional awareness facets (type clarity, source clarity, negative emotion differentiation, voluntary attention, involuntary attention) and sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, and socioeconomic status [SES]) in a large US sample (N = 919). Path analyses—controlling for variance shared between sociodemographic variables and allowing emotional awareness facets to correlate—demonstrated that (a) age was positively associated with type clarity and source clarity, and inversely associated with involuntary attention; (b) gender was associated with all facets but type clarity, with higher source clarity, negative emotion differentiation, voluntary attention, and involuntary attention reported by women than men; and (c) SES was positively associated with type clarity with a very small effect. These findings extend our understanding of emotional awareness and identify future directions for research to elucidate the causes and consequences of individual differences in emotional awareness.

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1. Introduction

Emotional awareness is a multifaceted construct that broadly encompasses how people understand, describe, and attend to their emotional experiences (Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994; Boden & Berenbaum, 2011; Gasper & Clore, 2000; Gohm & Clore, 2000; Palmieri, Boden, & Berenbaum, 2009; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Emotional awareness has multiple broad dimensions, including clarity of emotions (i.e., the degree to which people unambiguously identify, label, and represent their own emotions), emotion differentiation (i.e., the complexity with which people represent the type of emotion they experience), and attention to emotion (i.e., the degree to which people attend to their emotions). These dimensions are facets of several constructs popularized in scientific literature, including emotional intelligence and alexithymia (e.g., Bagby et al., 1994; Gohm, 2003; Gohm & Clore, 2000; Salovey et al., 1995).

Identifying sources of individual variation in emotional awareness will inform theory and research on its potential downstream consequences. For example, numerous researchers have explored how emotional awareness relates to emotion regulation (e.g., Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001; Boden & Thompson, 2015; Kashdan, Barrett, & McKnight, 2015; Vine & Aldao, 2014). Sociodemographic characteristics are one potential source of individual variation in

emotional awareness; associations between emotional awareness and sociodemographic characteristics are not well characterized. Addressing this gap might clarify the contexts within which emotional awareness contributes to adaptive emotion regulation. In this cross-sectional study, we investigated how age, gender, and SES relate to emotional awareness in a large generally representative adult sample of the U.S. Following, we review research on facets of emotional awareness and describe how sociodemographic characteristics may relate to them.

1.1. Emotional awareness

Recent research has delineated multiple sub-facets of two broad dimensions of emotional awareness: emotional clarity and attention to emotions (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011; Boden & Thompson, 2015; Huang, Berenbaum, & Chow, 2013). Emotional clarity is parsed into *type clarity* and *source clarity* (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011). Type clarity represents the extent to which people unambiguously identify, label, and represent the type of emotion experienced (e.g., sadness versus anger). Source clarity represents the extent to which people unambiguously identify, label, and represent the source of their emotional experiences (Boden & Berenbaum, 2011, 2012). For example, greater source clarity reflects an improved ability to understand the source of their distress, whereas greater type clarity reflects an improved ability to understand the particular type of distress they might feel (e.g., sadness, fear). Distinct from emotional clarity is *negative emotion differentiation* (Boden, Thompson, Dizén, Berenbaum, & Baker, 2013b), which captures the

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complexity with which people identify, distinguish, and label specific negative emotions (e.g., sad, depressed, anxious versus bad; Barrett et al., 2001; Kashdan et al., 2015). In the current study, we examined negative emotion differentiation, which has been shown to uniquely predict psychological well-being (e.g., Barrett et al., 2001; Erbas, Ceulemans, Pe, Koval, & Kuppens, 2014; Kashdan & Farmer, 2014). Attention to emotion is parsed into *voluntary attention* and *involuntary attention* (Huang et al., 2013; Boden & Thompson, 2015). Voluntary attention represents the extent to which people purposefully attend to their emotions, and involuntary attention represents the extent to which people attend to their emotions unintentionally (Huang et al., 2013).

1.2. Age

Emotional awareness facets should vary across the lifespan. We presume that older adults have had a greater number and more diverse learning experiences involving emotion. As people age, we posit that they experience more opportunities to “practice” identifying, labeling, and representing the type and source of their emotions. Therefore, we predict that age will be positively associated with type and source clarity. We expect to replicate the finding that emotion differentiation is positively associated with age (e.g., Ready, Carvalho, & Weinberger, 2008). We think that age will be positive associated with negative emotion differentiation because greater differentiation is related to more adaptive psychological and emotional functioning (e.g., Barrett et al., 2001; Kashdan et al., 2015), and growing older has been associated with adaptive patterns of emotional processing (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselrode, 2000). Research on the socioemotional selectivity theory (e.g., Carstensen, 2006; Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010) suggests that as people age, they prioritize socially and emotionally meaningful goals and become more selective about the situations and people with whom they associate. They focus more on the emotional aspects of their experience that optimize adaptive outcomes (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). This increased control over how older individuals attend to their emotional experiences suggests two things. First, they attend more to emotions that are consistent with their social and emotional goals. Second, they do not generally attend to emotions that are inconsistent with these goals. In line with this, we predict that older age will be positively associated with voluntary attention to emotions and inversely associated with involuntary attention to emotions.

1.3. Gender

Extant research has demonstrated that emotional experience differs by gender, but that many of these differences are driven by cultural factors (Brody & Hall, 2008). For example, women in Western cultures are stereotyped as being more emotionally expressive, emotionally skilled, and emotionally intense than men (see Brody & Hall, 2008). In fact, research has found that women attend more to their emotions than men (Boden, Gala, & Berenbaum, 2013a; Boden et al., 2013b; Gasper & Clore, 2000; Gohm & Clore, 2000). Because stereotypes affect behavior through both conscious and nonconscious manners (e.g., Hilton & von Hippel, 1996), compared to men, women might attend more to their emotions both voluntarily and involuntarily due to how they were socialized to experience emotion, including the influence of these aforementioned gender stereotypes.

In contrast to attention to emotion, past research indicates that type and source clarity do not vary by gender (Boden et al., 2013a; Gohm & Clore, 2000; B. Thompson, Waltz, Croyle, & Pepper, 2007; Boden & Berenbaum, 2012). Although the experience of emotions may vary by gender in terms of attention to emotions, the extent to which emotions are unambiguously identified, labeled, and represented (type clarity and source clarity) do not tend to differ. We do not make a specific prediction regarding the association between negative emotion differentiation and gender; no prior studies have examined their association, and relevant

theory does not suggest that men or women should differ in negative emotion differentiation.

1.4. Socioeconomic status

SES reflects social position and status in society; it is a complex construct with multiple sources of influence. The American Psychological Association (APA, Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007) recommends operationalizing SES by including income, occupation, and education. SES might relate to facets of emotional awareness. For example, if emotional awareness contributes to effective navigation of day-to-day life, then we would expect SES to positively relate to some of the facets. Indeed, in a prospective study, Libbrecht, Lievens, Carrette, and Côté (2014) demonstrated that higher emotional understanding, which is conceptually related to type and source clarity and negative differentiation, predicted higher levels of interpersonal academic performance (i.e., performance in courses that centered on doctor-patient communication) among medical students. Further, Perera and DiGiacomo (2015) found that during the transition to university, emotional intelligence, which includes aspects akin to type and source clarity and negative emotion differentiation, contributed to academic performance through the engagement in coping strategies. On the other hand, other research on facial expressions of emotions has suggested that lower SES might relate to greater emotional awareness. Compared to people in higher status positions, people in lower status positions are better able to distinguish facial expressions of emotions (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010); this increased awareness of others' emotions might extend to increased awareness of one's own emotions. Therefore, we explore how SES relates to emotional awareness facets in the present study.

1.5. The present study

We predicted that older *age* would be associated with higher type clarity, source clarity, negative emotion differentiation, and voluntary attention and lower involuntary attention; and that *gender* would not be associated with type clarity or source clarity, but that women would report higher voluntary attention and involuntary attention than would men. Finally, we explore how *SES* would be related to individual variation in emotional awareness facets without specific predictions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants & procedure

We recruited an adult sample through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk provides diverse samples of the U.S. population with data that is similar in quality to convenience samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). We restricted recruitment to U.S. citizens who were 18 years or older and spoke English as their first language. Of 1022 people who indicated interest in the study, 64 people did not meet inclusion criteria and 103 people did not complete any study items. The final sample was 919 participants.

Once eligibility was established, participants consented to participation and provided demographic characteristics (see Results). For our analyses of gender, we dummy-coded the data (men = 0, and women = 1). Participants completed a negative emotion differentiation task and self-report measures of clarity and attention. We presented measures in a randomized order across participants. We compensated participants 0.50USD, a rate consistent with MTurk surveys of this length.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotional awareness

Emotional clarity and attention to emotions were assessed with items recommended by Boden and Thompson (2015), which were based on the results of a factor analysis of data obtained from the

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