



Behavioral approach and behavioral inhibition as moderators of the association between negative life events and perceived control in midlife

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Abstract

A strong sense of control over the environment is an important component of well-being and promotes resilience to stress. This paper reports a longitudinal investigation of associations between negative life events in midlife, approach–avoidance aspects of personality, and control beliefs in a population-based sample of midlife adults. Results indicated that the experience of negative life events was associated with weaker control beliefs. Behavioral approach was positively related to control, and may be protective against negative life events undermining control beliefs, for those low in behavioral inhibition. Behavioral inhibition was associated with lower control beliefs. Implications for promoting adaptive self-regulation are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Maintaining a sense of control over the environment is an important component of psychological resilience to stress (Friborg, Hjermald, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003), and a key determinant

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of positive cognitive, physical and psychological outcomes in late life (Eizenman, Nesselroade, Featherman, & Rowe, 1997). Consequently, the study of developmental changes in control beliefs during midlife represents an important context for informing theory and research concerned with maximizing the capacity for aging well.

The focus of the present study was on the relationship between stressful life experiences and generalized perceptions of control in middle adulthood. Midlife represents an important but under-studied period of adult development. For some, it represents a time of peak performance, characterized by success in domains concerned with career progression and the establishment of financial security. However, midlife can also be associated with the negotiation of multiple challenges arising from the competing demands of work and family responsibilities, often in the context of significant role transitions and physical changes (Lachman, 2004). We aimed to shed new light on whether approach–avoidance aspects of personality were associated with the experience of negative events in midlife, and whether such personality processes moderated associations between the experience of negative events and generalized control beliefs.

2. Reinforcement sensitivity theory and perceived control

Central to Gray's (1987) neuropsychological theory of personality, now widely referred to as reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST; Corr & Perkins, 2006) are the behavioral approach (BAS) and behavioral inhibition (BIS) systems that broadly reflect dispositional tendencies toward approach and avoidance behavior. The BAS reflects a neurobiological sensitivity to desirable stimuli and directs attention, affective reactions and behavior toward such stimuli. BAS sensitivity is characterized by goal-directed behavior, and is thought to underlie positive emotional responses. In contrast, the BIS represents a neurobiological sensitivity to aversive stimuli, and an associated responsiveness to signals of negative outcomes. High BIS sensitivity is recognized as promoting passive avoidance, and is believed to underlie negative emotional responses and anxiety-proneness (Carver & White, 1994).

Recent revisions to RST (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; McNaughton & Corr, 2004) explicitly distinguish between fear and anxiety as distinct emotional elements of the neuropsychological processes that underlie approach and avoidance. Fear is defined by processes associated with avoidance of danger (represented by the fight-flight-freeze system, or FFFS). Anxiety arises from approach–avoidance, approach–approach or avoidance–avoidance goal conflicts, can be associated with passive avoidance or approach behavior in the form of moving the organism toward perceived danger, and is linked to activation of the BIS, which is central to the evaluation and resolution of such conflicts.

McNaughton and Corr (2004) note the functional overlap between fear (FFFS) and anxiety (BIS), and the role of BIS sensitivity in promoting avoidance as the preferred means of resolving goal conflicts. This functional overlap is also reflected in the BIS–BAS scales (Carver & White, 1994), the most widely used measure designed to assess trait manifestations of RST. The BIS–BAS scales pre-date revised RST, and do not explicitly distinguish between BIS and FFFS sensitivities in measuring avoidance tendencies (labeled BIS). As the BIS–BAS scales were used in the present study, subsequent references to the BIS in the context of the conceptualization

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