



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Affective style and depressive symptoms in youth of a North American Plains tribe: The moderating roles of cultural identity, grade level, and behavioral inhibition

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 February 2008

Received in revised form 5 February 2009

Accepted 11 February 2009

Available online 27 March 2009

Keywords:

Behavioral activation/behavioral inhibition

Depression

Cultural identity

Adolescence

Native American

ABSTRACT

Davidson's (1998) theory predicts that low behavioral activation system (BAS) sensitivity is linked to depressive symptoms. Empirical findings, however, have been ambiguous, and few studies have investigated this relationship in youth. Additionally, there has been little investigation of potential moderators of this relationship. This study examined the relationship between affective style and depressive symptoms among youth of a North American Plains tribe, and the potential moderating effects of cultural identity, grade level, and BIS. Surveys were completed by 151 adolescents in grades 7 through 12. Results indicated that BAS and Native Cultural Identification were each significantly associated with depression. However, the relationship between BAS and depression depended on cultural identification, grade level, and perhaps BIS. Overall, these findings provide support for the roles of affective style, cultural identification, and grade level in youth depression amongst Native Americans.

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1. Introduction

Several theorists have emphasized the connections between affective style and psychopathology (Davidson, 1998; Gray, 1987). The affective styles of behavioral activation (BAS) and behavioral inhibition (BIS) have received increased attention by clinical scientists, although the bulk of this research has been limited to adult populations (e.g., Johnson, Turner, & Iwata, 2003; McFarland, Shankman, Tenke, Bruder, & Klein, 2006).

The affective style of BAS promotes movement toward anticipated or actual incentives. Individuals who possess high BAS react with more positive emotion and excitement to incentives, such as rewards or desired goals (Davidson, 1998). In contrast, the affective style of BIS promotes inhibition in response to anticipated or actual punishment. Individuals who possess high BIS react more anxiously to unfamiliar, challenging, or threatening social and non-social stimuli (Leen-Feldner, Zvolensky, & Feldner, 2004). Low BAS is hypothesized to place individuals at higher risk for depression (Davidson, 1998). For instance, depressed individuals have been found to exhibit relatively lower levels of activation in the left frontal brain region (see Thibodeau, Jorgensen, & Kim, 2006).

However, the empirical findings using the most-commonly employed self-report measure of BAS (Carver & White, 1994) have been inconsistent (Johnson et al., 2003; Muris, Meesters, de Kanter, & Timmerman, 2005). Although several studies have found support for the association between low BAS and depression (Campbell-Sills, Liverant, & Brown, 2004; McFarland et al., 2006) other studies have failed to find relationships between BAS and depression (Johnson et al., 2003; Jorm et al., 1999).

The few studies that have investigated BAS in youth depression have also yielded conflicting findings. Muris et al. (2005) did not find BAS to correlate with either child self-report or parent report measures of child depression, although BIS was positively associated with both child and parent reports of depressive symptoms. However, Coplan, Wilson, Frohlick, and Zelenski (2006) found that both low BAS and high BIS related to child reports of depressive symptoms.

Gray's (1982) original reinforcement sensitivity model has since undergone revision (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Based on this revised theory of affective style, Corr (2002) has proposed a *joint sub-systems hypothesis* (JSH) that postulates that under certain circumstances BAS and BIS may interact to influence both reward-mediated and punishment-mediated behavior (Corr, 2002). Specifically, approach motivation would be highest when an individual experienced high levels of approach motivation and low levels of avoidance motivation; similarly, avoidance

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motivation would be highest when an individual experienced high avoidance motivation and low approach motivation. Although there is some empirical support for the JSH (Corr, 2004), no studies have explicitly tested the JSH in predicting depressive symptoms.

The few studies that have examined affective style and depressive symptoms in youth were conducted with largely Caucasian samples and none of these studies has tested potential moderators of this relationship. For instance, depression increases in incidence around pubescence and age may moderate a relationship between affective style and depressive symptoms. Further, affective style has been found to relate differently to important outcomes in independent and interdependent cultural contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In western cultural contexts, shy, anxious behavior is related to poor peer relationships, poor school competence, and low psychological well-being, whereas in east-asian cultural contexts such behavior is associated with good peer relationships, superior school competence, and high psychological well-being (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). The social and psychological adjustment of shy children in China may be due to the cultural acceptance of wary and socially restrained behaviors, whereas such acceptance is not present in western cultures (Chen et al., 2005). Therefore, cultural identity might moderate the relationship between affective style and depressive symptoms. Finally, Corr's JHS predicts the impact of BAS might interact with BIS in predicting depressive symptoms.

We investigated the relationship between affective style and depression in Native American youth on a North American plains reservation and examined whether grade level (as a proxy for age), cultural identification, or BIS moderated any relationship between BAS and depressive symptoms. The youth of the tribe investigated in this study are exposed to a wide variety of stressors, including community-wide poverty with 64% of the households living below the poverty line and over 70% of the working-age men unemployed. Depression is widely believed to be related to a number of other serious health risks in Native youth populations, including substance use, poor academic performance, conduct problems, school drop out, and suicide (Fleming & Manson, 1996). However, there have been no empirical investigations on affective style and depression in Native American youth.

The relationship between affective style and depressive symptoms may differ for Native American youth, who live in a culture described by most Native American scholars as more interdependent than mainstream North American culture (e.g., Whitesell, Mitchell, Kaufman, Spicer, & the Voices of Indian Teens Project Team, 2006). One might expect that in less individualistic cultures the benefits of high BAS, or perhaps high BAS and low BIS, are less apparent. In a collectivistic context, individuals might be expected to sacrifice personal desires and interests for the communal good. Someone who possesses an affective style that is more reactive to the presence of personal incentives might be at a disadvantage. However, native youth are exposed to both tribal and mainstream Euro-American cultural influences (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Whitesell et al., 2006). Consequently, using ethnic categories as a proxy for cultural identification is inappropriate and cultural identity must be explicitly assessed (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002).

This study had two major objectives and two exploratory questions. First, we expected that depression would be correlated with low BAS and high BIS. Second, we predicted that a strong Native American cultural identity would lessen the relationship between BAS and depressive symptoms. For the final set of questions, we did not specify directional hypotheses. First, we explored whether grade level might moderate the relationship between BAS and depressive symptoms. Second, based on the JSH, we examined whether the relationship between BAS and depressive symptoms might depend on levels of BIS.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 151 American Indian adolescents who attended middle or high school on an Indian Reservation in the Northern Plains of the United States. Participants ranged in grade level from 7 to 12th grade, with 51.0% of students in grades 7–8th, 28.5% of students in grades 9–10th and 19.2% of students in grades 11–12th. Of the participants, 45.7% were female and 99% identified themselves as enrolled members of a tribe.

2.2. Measures

Behavioral Inhibition and Activation Scale. The BIS/BAS scale is a 24 item questionnaire designed to assess BIS and BAS dispositional sensitivities according to Gray's theory of two general motivational systems (Carver & White, 1994). The BIS/BAS questions are rated on a scale of one to four (i.e., 1 = very true for me, 4 = very false for me). The BIS/BAS produces one score for BIS sensitivity and three scores for BAS sensitivity (Reward Responsiveness, Drive and Fun Seeking; Carver & White, 1994). The sum of the three BAS subscales (BAS total) is often used as an indication of overall BAS sensitivity (McFarland et al., 2006). BAS total sensitivity scores range from 13 to 52, and BIS sensitivity scores range from 7 to 28. Studies with adults indicate adequate construct validity as well as adequate convergent and discriminant validity of the BIS/BAS (Carver & White, 1994; Leen-Feldner et al., 2004). In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.84 for the BAS total scale and 0.55 for the BIS subscale. Although this alpha coefficient was low for the BIS subscale, it has demonstrated good psychometric properties in other samples (Campbell-Sills et al., 2004; Carver & White, 1994).

Children's Depression Inventory. The CDI is a 27-item questionnaire that measures cognitive, affective and behavioral symptoms of depression and is a widely used self-report measure of childhood depressive symptoms (Kovacs, 1985). For each item the child chooses one of three possible answers: 0 indicating an absence of symptoms, 1 indicating mild symptoms, and 2 indicating definite symptoms. The total score can range from 0 to 54. A cutoff score of 19 has been found to identify children in the upper 10% of the distribution in samples of nonclinical children (Kovacs, 1985). The CDI has been shown to possess excellent psychometric properties and has been administered and used successfully with Native American youth populations (Scott et al., 2008). Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present sample was 0.92.

Cultural Identification Scale. Participants' cultural identity was assessed using the Cultural Identification Scale (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991). The CIS consists of 16 items that ask about whether participants identify with the "Indian" way of life or the "White" way of life in a variety of domains (traditions, religion, activities, beliefs, and languages). This scale has been successfully used with Native American samples as well as other minority populations (Oetting, Swaim, & Chiarella, 1998). Scores on the CIS range from 8 to 32 for each of the subscales (i.e., "White" vs. "Native" way of life). For this study, we summed the items for the Native American Identity subscale and reverse coded the items for the White cultural identity subscale. Higher scores represented higher levels of Native American identity relative to White Identity. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.83.

2.3. Procedure

Classroom teachers and clinical psychology PhD graduate students administered the surveys at a middle school and a high

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