



Longitudinal investigation of mood variability and the ffm: neuroticism predicts variability in extended states of positive and negative affect

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Abstract

Mood variability is an important individual difference tendency that has received insufficient attention. The present study sought to advance understanding of mood variability by longitudinally investigating the personality correlates of variability in Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). In contrast to previous research, extended mood states (“mood over the past four weeks”) were the focus of attention. A substantial random community sample ($n = 303$ adults) gave mood reports twice a year for 2 years. Personality was measured on the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), averaged across the four waves. Consistent with extant research, the general vulnerability trait *N* arose as the sole significant predictor of mood variability. Importantly, this finding applied both to variation in NA (anxiety) and also PA (reward motivation or engagement). It is concluded that mood variability is a robust construct, with descriptive and potentially aetiological importance in affective vulnerability. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mood variability

The construct of mood variability (MV) has a long history in personality theory (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Depue, Krauss, & Spoont, 1987; Eysenck, 1981), and appears implicitly or explicitly in a number of psychiatric diagnoses (Cassano et al., 1999). While relatively few empirical investigations have been published, it has been concluded that MV has the characteristics of a trait (McConville & Cooper, 1999). Not only has the dimension arisen in factor analyses of self-report

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inventories (Allport, 1937), but a number of studies have found strong relationships between variability in disparate moods (Cooper & McConville, 1990; Emmons & King, 1989; Wessman & Ricks, 1966). The characteristic is also demonstrably stable within individuals across time (McConville & Cooper, 1997; Penner, Shiffman, Paty, & Fritzsche, 1994).

On both theoretical and clinical grounds, MV may be a particularly important individual difference variable. First, the mechanisms that are implicated in mood state may differ from those regulating mood stability (Cowdry, Gardner, O'Leary, Leibenluft, & Rubinow, 1991), and a deeper understanding of affect generally might be achieved by investigating MV. Second, MV appears to be associated with the presence of mood disorder. Early research by Eastwood and colleagues (Eastwood, Whitton, Kramer, & Peter, 1985) compared mood alterations in 30 individuals with affective disorder and 34 matched healthy controls. Mood reports were collected daily from the two groups for 14 months and subjected to spectral analysis. Rhythmicity of various forms was found in both groups, but the mood disorder group was distinguished by the amplitude of their periodicities. The authors conclude that mood variation does not of itself indicate pathology, but the extent of mood variation predicts the presence of mood disorder.

1.2. Mood variability and personality

A common strategy for exploring an individual difference variable is to investigate its pattern of correlations with recognised dimensions of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1995). A small number of studies have sought to situate MV within multi-dimensional personality space. The majority of these have investigated personality as defined by Eysenck's Big Three model (Eysenck, 1983).

Four distinct hypotheses about the relationship between MV and broad personality traits have been pursued. On the grounds that neuroticism (N) is associated with elevated mean negative affect, and extraversion (E) is associated with elevated mean positive affect, it has been hypothesised that MV should be most pronounced in neurotic extraverts (the choleric temperament in Galen's system, Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). On the grounds that MV appears to be correlated with lowered mean levels of happiness, a second interactional hypothesis proposes that MV should be primarily associated with high N accompanied by low E (the melancholic temperament, Williams, 1990). The Big Three trait of psychoticism (P) is associated with borderline personality disorder, which in turn is characterised by affective instability (APA, 1994). It has therefore also been hypothesised that MV might be most strongly predicted by P (McConville & Cooper, 1992). As reviewed by McConville and Cooper (1999), findings for these three hypotheses are mixed. The interaction hypotheses of both Eysenck and Williams have failed to be replicated after initial positive findings, and P has arisen inconsistently as a predictor of MV.

Finally, MV is an aspect of the definition of N (N: Eysenck, 1981), and N has arisen in a number of studies as a significant correlate of MV (Larsen, 1987; Wessman & Ricks, 1966; Williams, 1990, 1993). These findings are consistent with the study of Eastwood et al. (1985) reviewed earlier, in that N is the trait most strongly associated with the presence of mood disorder (Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). The possible association between MV and N is particularly significant, because N is not just a correlate of, but also a true vulnerability to mood disorder (Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). If MV is associated with N, therefore, MV is potentially implicated in the aetiology of mood disorder. Further research into MV as a fundamental mood process may then throw light on the mechanisms underpinning the development of mood disorders.

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