

Abstract

Background: It has been proposed, but not clearly established, that the inverse relationship between positive affect (PA) and social anxiety (SA) may be stronger in younger adults than adults who are older.

Method: Linear regression models were used to test whether age moderates the relationship between positive affect and social anxiety.

Results: Whereas there was no significant interaction between positive affect and age in predicting social anxiety in Study 1, the interaction was significant in Study 2.

Conclusion: It is possible that the hypothesized effect may only be present when positive affect refers primarily to valence, or the positive quality of affect, as in Study 2. Conversely, the measure used in Study 1 captures activated positive affect, a conflation of valence and arousal.

Introduction

- A meta-analysis by Kashdan (2007) supported a moderate, inverse relationship between social anxiety and positive affect ($r = -.36$)
- Mean effect size significantly varied across sample type
- Kashdan hypothesized that this result reflects a stronger inverse relationship between the constructs in younger adults than older adults
- This is consistent with longitudinal research suggesting that whereas positive affect remains relatively stable, social anxiety symptoms decrease over time (Vaux and Meddin, 1987; Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Kessler et al., 2005; Grant et al., 2005)
- If this is the case, then it is likely that whatever ties positive affect to social anxiety must become less influential over time

Participants

Study 1 Participants ($n = 489$)

- Primarily female (71%) and White (90%)
- Mean age of 61.46 years ($SD = 19.66$)

Study 2 Participants ($n = 202$)

- Primarily female (73%) and White (95%)
- Mean age of 67.57 years ($SD = 11.52$)

Measures

• Study 1 PA measure: *The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988)*

- Measures positive (e.g., *excited; proud*) and negative activated affect (e.g., *upset; scared*)
- PA scale includes 10 Likert-type items

• Study 2 PA measure: *The International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999)*

- The 4-item cheerfulness facet of the extraversion trait scale was used

• Studies 1 & 2 SA measure: *The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998)*

- Items describe anxiety-related reactions to a variety of social interaction situations
- The present studies utilized only the straightforward SIAS items (S-SIAS) for all analyses (See Rodebaugh et al., 2007)
- Study 2 data for S-SIAS item 4 was missing in 19 cases; we created a revised scale of the remaining S-SIAS items in order to avoid omitting these cases

Data Analytic Procedure

- Linear regression models were used to test whether age moderates the relationship between positive affect and social anxiety
- Age, positive affect total, and their interaction were entered into the model with S-SIAS scores as the outcome variable

Results: Study 1

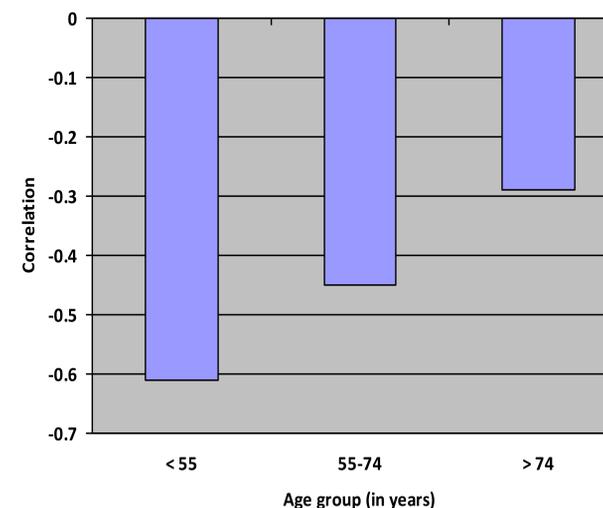
- Positive affect significantly predicted the S-SIAS score ($b^* = -.27$, part $r = -.27$, $p < .001$)
- However, there was no significant interaction between positive affect and age predicting social interaction anxiety symptoms ($b^* = .01$, part $r = .01$, $p = .805$)

Results: Study 2

- Unlike in Study 1, the interaction between age and positive affect significantly predicted S-SIAS score ($b^* = .16$, part $r = .15$, $p = .018$)
- We probed the interaction in the following age groups: ages 54 and below, ages 55-74, and ages 75 and above (See Figure below)

Figure : Study 2 Probing

Correlations Between Positive Affect and Social Anxiety in the Selected Age Groups



Note. A larger negative correlation indicates a stronger relationship

Post-Hoc Analyses

- In light of recent research, (e.g., Gould, Gerolimatos, Ciliberti, Edelstein & Smith, 2012), we proposed that certain S-SIAS items may not be relevant to a substantial number of older adults in both samples
- To test this hypothesis, we created two subscales: One consisting of more context-sensitive items that may not apply to older adults, and the other consisting of more context-irrelevant items
- The interaction between age and positive affect significantly predicted social anxiety symptoms for both subscales, indicating that the effect is not due merely to measurement error

Discussion

- Whereas there was no significant interaction in Study 1, the hypothesized interaction was present in Study 2
- These results suggest that age may only moderate this relationship when positive affect refers primarily to the activation-independent, pleasant quality of affect
- If the PANAS does indeed conflate two separate and distinct constructs into one, as suggested by Barrett and colleagues (1998) as well as our findings, then it is possible that we are incorrectly theorizing in regard to, and, in turn, inadequately assessing, positive affect
- The dynamics of the relationship between social anxiety disorder and the proposed dimensions underlying positive affect provides a good area for further research