



Worry, emotion control, and anxiety control in older and young adults

Christine E. Gould, Barry A. Edelstein*

Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Young adults worry more than older adults; however, few studies have examined why age differences may exist in the frequency of worry. The present study aimed to identify age differences in worry frequency, and examine the relation of age and worry to control over one's emotions and control over anxiety. Older adults worried less often than young adults; however, young women worried more often than young men and older adults. Also, young women reported less control over their anxiety and less control over the external signs of their emotions compared to young men and older adults. Worriers had less perceived control over their anxiety, less control over the inner experience of emotions, and less control over the external signs of emotion.

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1. Introduction

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is one of the most prevalent anxiety disorders among older adults, affecting about 7.3% of adults aged 55 and older during a 6-month period (Beekman et al., 1998). Further, GAD is associated with a host of problems among older adults including: increased disability (Porensky et al., 2009), sleep problems (Wetherell, Le Roux, & Gatz, 2003), diminished well-being (Wetherell et al., 2004), and poorer social functioning (Wetherell et al., 2004). As worry is one of the central diagnostic features of GAD, improving our understanding of older adults' experience of worry and control over worry is important.

Worry has been examined in community-dwelling older adults (e.g., Hunt, Wisocki, & Yanko, 2003), in older primary care patients (e.g., Brenes, 2006; Stanley, Novy, Bourland, Beck, & Averill, 2001), and most frequently in older adults with GAD (e.g., Wetherell et al., 2003). In general, older adults have lower levels of uncontrollable or excessive worry, and less frequent worry than young adults (e.g., Hunt et al., 2003). Interestingly, Hunt and colleagues found that while young adults worried more frequently than older adults, young adults utilized more strategies to cope with their worries (Hunt et al., 2003). Additionally, young and older adults worry about different topics (e.g., Diefenbach, Stanley, & Beck, 2001; Hunt et al., 2003), such that young adults worry frequently about work- or school-related and social issues, while older adults' concerns are

mostly health-related concerns (Diefenbach et al., 2001; Person & Borkovec, 1995; Wisocki, 1994).

While there are age differences in worry across adulthood, there is considerable variability in the frequency of worry among older adults. For example, older adults participating in the workforce report more frequent worry than retired older adults (Skaborn & Nicki, 2000). Furthermore, Neikrug (2003) found that the prevalence of worry is higher among the oldest-old (85 years or older) compared to the young-old (65–74). This variability is not surprising when one considers that older adults are a heterogeneous age group, spanning approximately 20 or more years difference in age between the young-old and the oldest-old.

One lifespan motivation theory that may provide a theoretical account for age differences in the frequency of worry is Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, 1991, 1995). According to SST and its supporting research (as reviewed by Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), older adults have a shortened time perspective and are motivated to maximize their positive experiences and minimize negative experiences. As one ages and becomes more aware of time limitations, this emotion regulation is achieved through the selection of social situations and individuals with whom one interacts in a fashion that maximizes the frequency, duration, and intensity with which one experiences positive emotions (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). In light of Carstensen's well-supported theory, older adults may be motivated to maintain lower levels of worry compared to young adults.

The findings of Gross et al. (1997) on emotion regulation are consistent with Carstensen's theory. That is, there appear to be age-related differences in emotion regulation, with older adults demonstrating better control over their emotions than young adults. In particular, older women report greater control over the inner experience of anger (Gross et al., Study 2, 3). Furthermore

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, P.O. Box 6040, Morgantown, WV 26506-6040, United States. Tel.: +1 304 293 2001; fax: +1 304 293 6606.

E-mail address: Barry.Edelstein@mail.wvu.edu (B.A. Edelstein).

older adults endorse greater control over the inner experience of happiness, sadness, fear, and disgust (Gross et al., Study 3). In a sample of women, older age was associated with: (1) greater inner control over happiness, sadness, fear, and anger; (2) greater external control over the signs of happiness and sadness; (3) less control over the external signs of disgust (Gross et al., Study 4).

Another possible explanation of age-related differences in emotion regulation may be found in research addressing the use of specific emotion regulation strategies. For example, older adults are more likely to use passive emotion regulation strategies to avoid situations that may be anger-provoking compared to middle-aged and young adults (Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004). In another study, older women reported more frequent positive reappraisal of thoughts about a conflict situation and less frequent suppressing of emotions compared to young women (John & Gross, 2004). Either being more skilled in reappraisal or using this technique more frequently may help older adults to dismiss or avoid troublesome worries. This notion is partially supported by Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, and Fresco's (2005) Emotion Dysregulation Theory of GAD. Mennin et al. found that greater worry (more excessive and uncontrollable) is associated with lower levels of emotion regulation in a sample of young adults. In summary, older adults worry less frequently and may be better at regulating their emotions compared to young adults. Additionally, worrying is associated with lower levels of emotion regulation among young adult samples. However, to date, no studies have examined the relation between emotion regulation and worry in older adults.

The present study first aimed to reproduce the findings of earlier work demonstrating age differences in the frequency and content of worry (e.g., Hunt et al., 2003; Stanley, Beck, & Zebb, 1996). The second aim was to examine the extent that there are age differences in emotion control¹ as demonstrated in previous studies (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004; Gross et al., 1997; John & Gross, 2004). The hypothesis that older adults have greater control over their emotions compared to young adults was tested. In addition to examining age differences in emotion control, age differences in control over one particular state, anxiety, was addressed in this study as well. While no studies have investigated age differences in anxiety control, age differences have been found for inner control over fear and inner and external control over other emotions, with older adults reporting more emotion control than young adults (Gross et al., 1997). It was also hypothesized that older adults would report greater perceived anxiety control compared to young adults in the present study.

The third aim of this study was to examine possible explanations for the age differences in worry. In light of previous findings that worrying generates negative affect (e.g., McLaughlin, Borkovec, & Sibrava, 2007) and that worrying is related to greater emotion dysregulation (e.g., Mennin et al., 2005), it was hypothesized that emotion control would be negatively related to worry. Additionally, it was hypothesized that greater perceived anxiety control would be associated with lower levels of worry, as had been found in a previous examination of young adults (Brown, Antony, & Barlow, 1992).

In light of the age differences in worry and in emotion regulation strategies (e.g., Stanley et al., 1996; Gross et al., 1997), and the relation of emotion control to anxiety (e.g., Brown et al., 1992), perceived anxiety control was proposed a mediator of the relation between age and worry. Older adults may structure their

lives to not engage in anxiety-inducing situations, and thus older adults may report having more control over their anxiety. This antecedent-control strategy is focused on the selection of situations to participate in (Gross, 2007). After using overt avoidance strategies, older adults may be less likely to use worry as a cognitive avoidance strategy (c.f., Cognitive Avoidance Theory of Worry, Borkovec, Alcaine, & Behar, 2004). This proposed mediation model could account for the lower prevalence of pathological worry in older adults due to the increased perceived anxiety control.

A second mediation model was examined with emotion control as a mediator of the relation between age and worry. That is, emotion control would account (or partially account) for the difference in worry that is predicted by age. Older adults might be more skilled at managing their emotional experience and emotion expression (Gross et al., 1997; John & Gross, 2004), which could explain the lower frequency of worry in this age group. Variables such as gender, will also be explored worry and emotion control may differ among males and females.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and ten young and older adults were recruited from undergraduate and graduate classes, and from the community (via flyers, a television ad, and researcher visits to senior centers and independent living facilities). Seven older adults were not included in the following analyses for various reasons ($n = 1$ withdrew consent, $n = 6$ questionnaires not returned or returned with large amounts of missing data). All participants were entered into a raffle for four \$75 cash prizes.

Fifty-one young adults, aged 18–30 years of age ($M = 21.43$, $SD = 2.88$ years) and 52 older adult participants, aged 65 years of age and older ($M = 77.59$, $SD = 14.26$), returned completed questionnaires. Demographic data for the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic and participant characteristics by age group.

	Young adults ($N = 51$)	Older adults ($N = 52$)
Age	21.4 (2.9)	77.7 (7.5)
Gender (Female)	58.8%	64.2%
Years of education	14.7 (2.0)	14.3 (2.5)
Marital status		
Single (%)	96.1	3.8
Married (%)	3.9	51.9
Separated/divorced (%)	0	7.7
Widowed (%)	0	36.5
Ethnicity		
Caucasian (%)	96.1	94.2
African American (%)	3.9	0
Native American (%)	0	1.9
Biracial (%)	0	3.8
Job status		
Employed full/part-time (%)	17.6	5.9
Student (%)	82.4	0
Homemaker/retired (%)	0	90.2
Other or not reported (%)	0	3.9
Income*		
Under \$10,000–\$29,999 (%)	15.7	39.1
\$30,000–\$59,999 (%)	23.5	23.6
\$60,000–\$89,999 (%)	19.6	19.6
\$90,000+ (%)	41.2	17.4
Not reported	0	11.5
Health Status*		
Excellent/good (%)	82.4	57.7
Average/fair/poor (%)	17.6	42.3

* Significantly different at $p < .05$, as determined by Chi-square.

¹ Emotion regulation is the construct of interest in much previous research in the emotion and lifespan developmental literature. In the present study, a measure of emotion control was selected for use. Emotion control may be more narrowly defined than emotion regulation. For a discussion of emotion regulation, the interested reader is referred to Gross (2007, 1998).

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