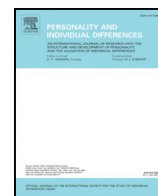




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Neuroticism's susceptibility to distress: Moderated with mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

It is recognised that substantial associations exist between personality and distress, and that distress is a primary contributor to the onset of mood related disorders. This study examined the relationship between aspects of personality and distress, and explored whether dispositional mindfulness evidenced a significant moderation effect. Participants ($N = 165$) were recruited through a virtual learning environment and a social media website and completed an online survey which included the Friedberg Mindfulness Inventory, the Kessler Distress Scale and the Five Factor Personality Inventory. Neuroticism was the only personality trait that predicted non-specific psychological distress (NPD). A hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed mindfulness moderated the neuroticism – NPD relationship with a substantial standardised beta weight and large effect size. Thus, lower NPD was found in individuals with higher dispositional mindfulness even in the presence of high neuroticism scores. This study presents an initial stage in examining the benefits of mindfulness in relation to neuroticism's vulnerability to NPD and may instigate further research into targeted mindfulness interventions.

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1. Introduction

Specific personality traits have evidenced susceptibility to emotional dysregulation and distress (Vinkers et al., 2014). Given the stable nature of adult personality, determining which personality traits are a diathesis to distress and what interventions will effectively reduce distress is warranted. The World Health Organisation (WHO) identified psychological distress as a primary predictor of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (WHO, 2001). Massé (2000) described distress as a crisis of the self which occurs when the individual attempts, but fails, to adjust or control important life or environmental elements resulting in an inability to emotionally self-regulate.

Even though we often consider distress as a singular construct, it is instructive to differentiate between specific forms of pathological distress (e.g. anxiety and depression) and non-specific psychological distress (NPD) as the latter is employed in this study. The measurement of NPD has been used in government and WHO health surveys as an important crosswalk between general community and clinical epidemiology (Kessler et al., 2002). In their study which attempted to identify indicators of the future onset of mental health disorders McVeigh et al. (2006) characterised NPD as evidencing elevated levels of cognitive, behavioural and emotional suffering that are also shared with a wide range of psychiatric disorders but that are not specific to any single disorder. NPD symptomatology displays statistical properties that support its identification as a psychological construct including high inter-

correlation and high factor loadings on a single dimension. While individuals with significant levels of NPD are at increased risk of a DSM-IV disorder, those who have been treated for a classified psychiatric disorder are likely to demonstrate reduced levels of measurable distress (Dohrenwend, Shrout, Eqri, & Mendelsohn, 1980).

In contemporary practice, measuring dimensional NPD takes on a parallel significance with criterion diagnosis as an indication of severity, to further inform prognosis and as a portent of potential onset of psychopathology in individuals yet to be diagnosed (Lawrence, Mitrou, & Zubrick, 2011). Additionally, given NPD is predictive of a range of mental and physical health problems and will likely aggravate pre-existing conditions, it is important to acknowledge it may also tax an individual's capacity to cope.

Personality theory seeks to understand the variance in the patterns of human behaviour (Costa & McCrae, 2010). This understanding can then inform better practice. This is important as once adulthood is reached, the consistent patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour that are amalgamated into personality traits, become relatively stable across the remainder of the lifespan (Costa & McCrae, 2006). A widely utilised model to measure personality is the Five-Factor Model (Big 5) that posits five major overarching higher-order dimensionally scaled personality factors. Arterberry, Martens, Cadigan, and Rohrer (2014) suggest the Big 5 should be used to explore personality traits that lead to both adaptive and maladaptive states. This research will examine susceptibility to NPD and the personality constructs of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Neuroticism incorporates elements of worrying, nervousness, emotional insecurity and feelings of inadequacy. Under stress, an individual who scores high in neuroticism tends to focus on the negative elements

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of the stress-provoking situation and retreats from a challenge (Ross, Canada, & Rausch, 2002). Neuroticism is a dimensional trait with elevated 'stress reactivity' producing frequent negative emotions. This negative affect, coupled with a perception of a threatening world and beliefs about one's inability to manage challenging events, leads to varying levels of concordant distress and vulnerability to mood disorders (Barlow, Ellard, Sauer-Zavala, Bullis, & Carl, 2014). In their extensive meta-analysis Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, and Watson (2010) found large effect sizes and strong associations between neuroticism and anxiety and depression. Ode and Robinson (2009) implicate neuroticism as the primary risk factor in state related negative affect. Additionally, longitudinal studies have supported neuroticism's relationship to both stress and depression (Klein, Durbin, & Shankman, 2009). Subsequently it is expected neuroticism will demonstrate a significant and positive relationship with NPD.

Extraversion predicts comfort levels with interpersonal relationships and is considered to have a high degree of heritability (Jylha, Melartin, Rystysala, & Isometsa, 2009). Extraverts are typically companionable, outgoing, and confident while, at the other end of the spectrum, introverts tend to be shy and reserved (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012). In the domain of approach oriented behaviour, extraversion has protective indicators such as positive affect (Wilt, Nofle, Fleeson, & Spain, 2012) which buffers the individual against distress. In a large participant study ($N = 1364$), Oerlemans and Bakker (2014) determined that extraverts were happier and experienced greater 'in the moment happiness' which is largely explained by sociability and responding to rewarding activities. Although research into low extraversion and negative affective states has been mixed, there is a general consensus that high extraversion is predictive of positive mood states (Wilt et al., 2012) while low extraversion is associated with low mood and depression (Jylha et al., 2009). Thus, it is possible that individuals low in extraversion may experience higher levels of NPD.

Openness encompasses willing acceptance of inner (positive and negative) feelings as well as experiences, new ideas, aesthetic appreciation and receptiveness to novel ideas and values (Gregory, Nettlebeck, & Wilson, 2010). Williams, Rau, Cribbet, and Gunn (2009) also found greater vulnerability to stress among individuals low in openness while those with higher openness displayed greater resilience. In line with this literature, it is probable there will be an inverse, but a non-predictive relationship, between openness and NPD (Kotov et al., 2010).

Agreeableness represents features such as kindness, empathy, altruism and consideration of other's needs and is negatively associated with reactive aggression (Ehsan & Bahramizadeh, 2011). While Ode and Robinson (2009) posited that agreeableness promotes self-regulation of negative emotions, no relationship is expected between agreeableness and NPD.

Conscientiousness is considered to develop early in childhood (Eisenberg, Duckworth, Spinrad, & Valiente, 2014) and typifies self-disciplined, rule orientated, achievement driven and dependable behaviour. Conscientiousness is hallmarked by deliberate responding rather than reacting with habitual impulsiveness and enhances self-control (Eisenberg et al., 2014). While it is predictive of recovery from negative emotional response, no relationship is expected between conscientiousness and NPD.

Personality theory provides a framework for understanding an individual's pattern of thoughts, feelings, social adjustments, and behaviours exhibited over time. The concept of personality patterns has found increasing use in empirical studies of psychological treatments and interventions. One such intervention is mindfulness. The inverse relationship between mindfulness and distress is well established (Lance et al., 2014). Mindfulness did not originate in the modernity of psychology but was understood at a sophisticated level by ancient cultures (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Arising from Buddhist practice, mindfulness is defined as a quality of consciousness hallmarked by clear in-the-moment awareness of the inner and external world and includes thinking, emotions, sensations, behaviours, social interactions and the

environment, with an element of interest, curiosity, acceptance and unbiased receptivity (McWilliams, 2014). Bishop et al. (2004) offered a two-fold definition of mindfulness; self-regulation of attention to thoughts, emotions and sensations in the present moment; and a particular adoption of attitude to the experience. Both may provide some indication as to the effectiveness of mindfulness in reducing distress.

Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, and Freedman (2006) claimed the important elements of mindfulness are intention, attention, and attitude. Intention denotes the motivation for self-regulation, self-exploration and personal development. Attention is purposeful observing in the present moment from an internal (what am I thinking and feeling?) and an external (what is happening right now?) perspective. Attitude involves how the person decides to view the experience and is influential in whether an experience is perceived as deleterious. Shapiro et al. (2006) proposed consciously committing to an 'attitude quality'. This involves self-questioning what perspective will be taken in relation to an experience, e.g. will I view this with curiosity, openness, self-care, love, or acceptance, or am I capable of experiencing this without adopting an attitudinal position? Bishop et al. (2004) referred to this attitudinal element as 'orientation to experience' which involves a purposeful decision to focus on the situation with acceptance, curiosity and non-striving.

Mindfulness has been considered in both state and trait forms. Measures of state mindfulness are commonly associated with mindfulness interventions (Eisendrath et al., 2014) while trait mindfulness is indicative of a relatively consistent mindful disposition (Baer, 2011). Kiken, Garland, Bluth, Palsson, and Gaylord (2015) determined state and trait mindfulness inversely predicted distress, and that trait mindfulness significantly increased as a result of state mindfulness training. Thus, while the current research only explored trait mindfulness, it is acknowledged that dispositional mindfulness can be altered using state mindfulness practices which, in turn, may result in ongoing distress reduction.

In summary, the literature suggests that neuroticism is predictive of distress while extraversion is inversely related to negative affective states (e.g. Barlow et al., 2014). In contrast, conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness (e.g. Javaras et al., 2012) are positively linked to adaptive mood states, supporting the attestation that personality can predict susceptibility to distress. Given the stable nature of adult personality, research to confirm which personality traits are a diathesis to distress and who would benefit from increased mindfulness is the fundamental tenet of this study. Although, Giluk (2009) used a quantitative meta-analysis to review the correlates between the Big 5 and mindfulness, no single study has inclusively sought to explore the predictive relationship between all five personality traits and NPD while examining mindfulness as a moderator of this relationship. This research will quantify the relationship between the Big 5 personality traits and NPD while individually exploring the moderation effect of trait mindfulness on those respective interactions. As such, it is predicted that neuroticism will be a better predictor of NPD than extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Furthermore, the moderating influence of mindfulness will weaken the neuroticism - nonspecific psychological distress (N-NPD) relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 165 participants (135 females and 30 males; age range = 18–72, $M_{age} = 38.69$ years; $SD = 12.80$) provided completed surveys. Demographic analysis indicated respondents were predominantly from Australia (97%), followed by the United Kingdom (2%), Sri Lanka (1%) and other (1%). All participants were volunteers and no incentive to participate was provided.

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