



Research paper

Latent classes of trait affect and cognitive affective regulation strategies are associated with depression, non-suicidal self-injury, and well-being



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ABSTRACT

Background: The present study sought to better understand the unique profiles of late adolescents' affective functioning by exploring patterns of trait affect and cognitive affective regulation strategies. The study also examined whether these unique profiles significantly predicted depressive symptoms, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), and well-being outcomes.

Methods: Data from a sample of 590 late adolescents were examined ($M = 19.14$ years, $SD = 1.41$, 63% Female, 62% Caucasian, 38% African American/Biracial). Participants were followed for an average of 14 months ($SD = 2.53$) and completed measures of trait affect, cognitive affective regulation, depression, NSSI, and well-being. Data were examined using latent class analysis.

Results: Five subgroups with unique patterns of affective functioning were identified. Late adolescents who reported above average levels of negative affect, dampening of positive affect, brooding, and reflection, coupled with below average levels of positive affect and positive rumination, were more likely to report having higher levels of depressive symptoms and greater engagement in NSSI during the one-year period prior to baseline. Similarly, the late adolescents fitting this profile also reported lower levels of well-being and were more likely to report engaging in NSSI at the follow-up.

Limitations: Limitations include a narrow exploration of affective regulation strategies and the addition of key variables after the initiation of the larger study.

Conclusions: These findings shed light on affective regulation factors relevant to the experience of depressive symptoms and NSSI, and the promotion of well-being.

1. Introduction

It is broadly accepted that the way people respond to affective experiences is related to outcomes of psychopathology and well-being (Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015; Gross and Thompson, 2007; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Specifically, substantial evidence suggests that individuals are able to exert control over their affective responses by utilizing cognitive affective regulation strategies (Gross, 1998; Gross and John, 2003; Gross and Thompson, 2007), and that these strategies serve to increase and/or decrease outcomes of pathology and well-being. Whereas much research has focused on negative affect and cognitive affective regulation strategies for negative affect to better understand psychopathology and well-being, few studies have explored positive affect and affective regulation strategies for positive affect to develop a more inclusive understanding of late adolescents' mental health. To better understand the unique profiles of late adolescents' affective functioning, the current study explored patterns of positive

and negative trait affect, as well as positive and negative cognitive affective regulation strategies. Further, to understand and potentially be able to foster factors that help late adolescents flourish, we examined whether the identified profiles were related to concurrent and prospective depression, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), and well-being.

2. Negative and positive affect

Trait negative (NA) and positive (PA) affect refer to the tendency to experience negative and positive emotionality, respectively. Much research has examined the relationship between trait NA and PA and psychological outcomes (e.g., Watson et al., 1988a). Indeed, research suggests that higher NA (experiencing frequent and heightened negative emotions) is associated with depressive symptomatology (Watson and McKee Walker, 1996) and low levels of well-being (Larsen, 2009). Research also suggests that high levels of NA are associated with engagement in NSSI (Victor and Klonsky, 2014). Whereas high levels of

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NA are generally predictive of poor psychological outcomes, research suggests that low levels of NA are associated with increased levels of subjective well-being (Singh and Jha, 2008).

Although once conceptualized as along the same continuum as NA (Ekman, 1992; Watson and Tellegen, 1985; Bradburn, 1969), a large body of research suggests that trait PA is a distinct construct and is independently implicated in psychopathology and well-being outcomes (e.g., Gilbert, 2012; Diener et al., 1991; Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson and Levenson, 1998). Indeed, a lack of PA has been demonstrated to predict depressive symptoms (Watson et al., 1988b; Hudson et al., 2015). Moreover, low PA also has been linked to NSSI (Bresin, 2014; Victor and Klonsky, 2014). Although low levels of PA have been found to be related to greater degrees of psychopathology, including depression and NSSI, high levels of PA can buffer against negative emotionality (Fredrickson and Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson et al., 2000) and are associated with beneficial outcomes related to psychological well-being (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Tugade et al., 2004).

3. Cognitive affective regulation

Negative and positive affect serve a host of adaptive functions by directing our attention to important stimuli in our environment and preparing us for behavioral responses (Gross, 2014; Lazarus, 1991). Although the experience of affect can be very helpful to our survival in this manner, our responses to our affective experiences may not always be adaptive, which can, in turn, lead to psychopathology (Gross, 2014). Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that individuals exert a significant amount of control over their affective experiences through the use of numerous cognitive affective regulation strategies, which can influence the occurrence, duration, and psychological experience of affect (Gross, 1998).

The Response Styles Theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) was proposed to identify consequences of the way in which individuals respond to NA. This theory posits that when individuals engage in rumination (i.e., repetitive focusing on the causes, meanings, and consequences of negative moods), they exacerbate and prolong experiences of NA, and increase the likelihood that NA will evolve into psychopathology. Treynor et al. (2003) proposed a two-factor model of rumination including *reflection* (i.e., engaging in cognitive problem solving to alleviate one's NA) and *brooding* (i.e., passively dwelling on negative feelings). Whereas brooding is consistently related to outcomes of depression (Treynor et al., 2003; Burwell and Shirk, 2007), NSSI (e.g., Hoff and Muehlenkamp, 2009), and low levels of well-being (O'Connor and Williams, 2014; Harrington and Loffredo, 2011), the relationship between reflection and these outcomes has been mixed (Burwell and Shirk, 2007; Harrington and Loffredo, 2011; Hoff and Muehlenkamp, 2009; Treynor et al., 2003).

Building on research suggesting that psychopathology, such as depression, results not only from rumination on NA but also from responding less to PA (Rottenberg et al., 2002; Hayes and Feldman, 2004), Feldman et al. (2008) developed the Responses to Positive Affect Scale (RPAS). The RPAS was designed to measure *positive rumination* (i.e., the tendency to experience recurrent thoughts about positive self-qualities and experiences) and *dampening* (i.e., the tendency to experience thoughts that reduce the intensity and duration of positive mood states). Indeed, these PA regulation strategies have been related to outcomes of depression (Fussner et al., 2015; Kovacs et al., 2016), NSSI (Bijttebier et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2015a, 2015b) and well-being (Fredrickson et al., 2000; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004; Quoidbach et al., 2010), such that higher levels of positive rumination are associated with adaptive outcomes and higher levels of dampening of PA are associated with maladaptive outcomes.

4. Current study

Although research has examined the independent relationships

between trait affect or cognitive affective regulation strategies and psychological outcomes, little research has examined the nuances of how trait affect and cognitive affective regulation styles coincide within individuals and may work together. This is a major gap in the literature, given that these constructs are inherently intersecting and do not operate in isolation. Indeed, although research suggests that negative affect is a distinct entity from positive affect, positive affect may buffer the effects of negative affect (Fredrickson and Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson et al., 2000). Moreover, research indicates that the employment of multiple cognitive regulation strategies, or cognitive flexibility, may be more protective against psychopathology than effectively engaging in only one strategy (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Fredrickson, 2004; Steffen et al., 2016), suggesting that it is important to understand which strategies co-occur and whether there may be specific combinations of strategies that promote mental health. Thus, examining trait affect and affective regulation styles in concert will allow us to better understand their interplay and how they manifest within individuals. More critically, little research has examined whether certain patterns of affect and cognitive affective regulation strategies may pose greater risk for maladaptive outcomes. As such, the goal of the current study was to employ a person-centered approach, Latent Class Analysis (LCA), to examine whether there are classes of late adolescents with homogenous profiles of trait affect and cognitive affective regulatory strategies. Identifying such subgroups may aid in distinguishing those late adolescents at greatest risk for maladaptive psychological outcomes.

To our knowledge, no study has performed LCA to identify subgroups of individuals based on trait affect and both positive and negative cognitive affective regulation strategies. Thus, we do not offer hypotheses about the number of latent classes that the LCA will identify nor how the levels of trait affect and PA and NA regulation strategies will relate within classes. However, we hypothesize that subgroups characterized by low PA, high NA, high brooding, high dampening, and low positive rumination will be associated with higher depressive symptoms, greater engagement in NSSI, and lower well-being. We further hypothesize that subgroups characterized by high PA, low NA, low brooding, low dampening, and high positive rumination will be associated with lower depressive symptoms, reduced engagement in NSSI, and greater well-being.

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

Adolescent participants were recruited for Project TEAM, a longitudinal, multiwave, behavioral high-risk study that investigates vulnerability for bipolar spectrum disorder (BSD) onset (see Alloy et al., 2012). Participants were recruited from Philadelphia-area high schools and universities and participated in a two-phase screening process. In Phase 1, adolescent participants ($N = 9991$) were administered two measures assessing behavioral approach system (BAS) sensitivity, with students scoring in the upper 15th percentile on both measures categorized as High BAS (HBAS), and students scoring between the 40th and 60th percentiles categorized as Moderate BAS (MBAS). Students who were included in the HBAS and MBAS ($n = 1180$) groups were invited for Phase II screening, where they were administered self-report questionnaires and a diagnostic interview to assess mood and psychotic disorders. Participants were excluded from the study if they met *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) criteria for a BSD or a psychotic disorder, or if they were not sufficiently fluent in English.

A total of 590 participants ($M = 18.73$ years, $SD = 1.40$; 62% Caucasian; 63% Female; 65% high BAS group) completed the baseline measures necessary to be included in the LCA. The current study is still underway and retention rates are likely to change. To date, 75% of participants completed at least one follow-up visit and are continuing in the study. However, for the purpose of this study, only participants who

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