



The relationship between mood experienced during an exam, proneness to frustration and neuroticism



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ABSTRACT

We examined how proneness to experience feelings of aggression in frustrating situations and neuroticism are related to three mood dimensions – tense arousal (TA), energetic arousal (EA) and hedonic tone (HT) – measured before and after an exam. Individuals high in sensitivity to frustration had low HT and EA, and high TA after completing the exam. The analysis revealed that frustration was significantly associated with TA, even after controlling for neuroticism and TA before exam. Neuroticism was significantly correlated with mood in both measurements. The results suggest that the relationship between individual differences in response to frustration and mood is sensitive to situational factors, while neuroticism is rather chronically associated with negative emotionality.

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1. Introduction

There are various factors determining mood and they generally can be categorized as internal and external. External factors are various situations able to improve or worsen mood, e.g., physical activity or listening to music are known to improve mood (Biernacki, Jankowski, Kowalczyk, Lewkowicz, & Dereń, 2012; Thayer, 1996; Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994), while an exam is known to worsen mood (Zajenkowski, Goryńska, & Winiewski, 2012). Internal factors pertain mostly to personality (Jankowski & Zajenkowski, 2012), with neuroticism showing the most robust associations (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2009; Zajenkowski et al., 2012). In the present study we examine other individual difference dimensions, which may be strongly correlated with mood in a specific situation.

As mentioned above, participation in an exam worsens mood; namely, in the exam situation hedonic tone and energetic arousal were lower, while tense arousal was higher in comparison to neutral conditions (Zajenkowski et al., 2012). The mood alteration was, however, less striking in individuals with low neuroticism, what suggests that a low level of this trait might act against mood worsening (Zajenkowski et al., 2012). In the present study, we aimed to test other individual characteristics that might be particularly relevant to stressful situations, theoretically even more than neuroticism itself. We explored the

relationship between the tendency towards aggressive feelings in frustrating situations and mood experienced in potentially stressful conditions. In particular, we referred to a construct recently developed by Lawrence (2006) who argued that there might be individual differences in responses to situational triggers. Lawrence (2006) proposed two factors – sensitivity to frustrations and sensitivity to provocations – according to which people may vary in their susceptibility to certain situational aggressive triggers. The former factor reflects proneness to feel aggressive in response to having one's goals blocked and to uncontrollable negative events. This includes situations in which the individual lacks control, such as high ambient temperature, a crowded place, being stressed or having academic problems. Sensitivity to provocation reflects a predisposition to feel aggressive in reaction to goading and provocation from others (e.g., insult and betrayal).

Because situational context is particularly important in evoking aggressive feelings (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2002), we decided to focus on mood experienced in a specific setting. In particular, we examined the mood of students before and after an exam. We referred to the three-factor model of mood as the most relevant for understanding core affective experience within various concepts (Schimmack & Grob, 2000). The model proposed by Matthews, Jones, and Chamberlain (1990) distinguishes between three dimensions: tense arousal (TA; contrasting tension and nervousness with relaxation and calmness), energetic arousal (EA; vigor and energy vs. fatigue and tiredness), and hedonic tone (HT; contrasting pleasantness with unpleasantness), within the two factors proposed by Thayer (1989; TA and EA).

Because stress and negative stimuli can lead to aggression (Berkowitz, 1990), in the present investigation, we expected sensitivity

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to frustration (which might be related to academic problems) to be associated with mood assessed in a demanding academic situation, such as taking an exam (Lawrence, 2006). However, it is difficult to expect a specific direction for this relationship, since aggressive feelings may be associated with both positive and negative mood (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Abramson, & Peterson, 2009). Moreover, previous research showed that neuroticism is an important predictor of both mood (e.g., Matthews et al., 2009; Zajenkowski et al., 2012), and sensitivity to frustration (Zajenkovska, Jankowski, Lawrence, & Zajenkowski, 2013). Therefore, we decided to control for this personality trait in our study to see the unique contribution of frustration to mood in a demanding situation. This paper extends previous work by exploring how the basic affective experiences are associated with an aggression-related construct, i.e., the tendency towards aggressive feelings.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The study involved 217 (176 females) undergraduate students from the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw took part in the study. Their mean age was 21.10 (SD = 2.72). The course selected for the study ended with a written final exam. Participants were asked to assess their mood before and after the exam. After the exam, measures of personality and sensitivity to provocation and frustration were administered.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mood

Mood was assessed using the Polish adaptation (Goryńska, 2005) of the UWIST Mood Adjective Checklist (UMACL; Matthews et al., 1990), a 29-item questionnaire which provides state measures of EA, TA and HT. Cronbach's alphas for each subscale are 0.78, 0.83, and 0.89, respectively.

2.2.2. Sensitivity to frustrations

The STAR scale (Lawrence, 2006) in Polish adaptation (Zajenkovska et al., 2013) was used to measure aggression-related sensitivities. The questionnaire consists of 22 items (10 reflect Sensitivity to Frustrations, and 12 Sensitivity to Provocations). Participants are presented with 22

situations and are asked to rate how aggressive each makes them typically feel on a 5-point scale. The instrument has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .80$ for Frustrations) and its validity has been examined previously (Lawrence, 2006).

2.2.3. Neuroticism

The NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) in Polish adaptation (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, & Sliwowska, 1998) was used to measure neuroticism. This scale contains twelve items and its internal consistency (α) equals .80.

3. Results

First, we correlated all variables used in the study (see Table 1). The relationship between sensitivity to frustration with mood was numerically stronger during the second mood measurement as compared to the before exam situation. Individuals tend to relate their tense arousal mood with their frustration levels more after an exam than before it (the correlations statistically differ at the .05 level, following the procedure suggested by Mylonas, Veligekas, Gari, & Kontaxopoulou, 2012). However, the differences for the HT and EA remained at the numerical level only (the differences between the respective correlations before and after the exam were not statistically significant). With respect to neuroticism, the same pattern of correlations for both mood measurements (before and after the exam) was found, all differences remaining at non significant levels. Moreover, neuroticism and frustration were positively related which is in agreement with other investigations (Zajenkovska et al., 2013).

Next, we analyzed the changes of mood between measurements (the correlations of mood dimensions can be found in Table 1). The analyses revealed the decrease of HT ($t(197) = 4.96$; $p < 0.001$), EA ($t(197) = 4.30$; $p < 0.001$), and TA ($t(197) = 4.80$; $p < 0.001$) after the exam. We have also tested for possible sex differences in the mood experienced after the exam. Analysis of variance showed no significant effects for HT ($F(1, 215) = 0.85$; $\eta^2 = 0.004$), TA ($F(1, 215) = 0.28$; $\eta^2 = 0.001$) and EA ($F(1, 215) = 1.60$; $\eta^2 = 0.008$). The latter results are consistent with previous research with UMACL dimensions (Zajenkowski et al., 2012).

In order to analyze the effect of frustration on mood, partial correlations were calculated, controlling for mood before the exam and neuroticism (see Table 2). Doing so, we wanted to examine the

Table 1
The intercorrelations and descriptive statistics of all variables used in the study.

		Frustration	N	Before exam			After exam		
				HT1	TA1	EA1	HT2	TA2	EA2
Frustration			.24**	-.07	.06	-.11	-.14*	.27**	-.20**
N				-.32**	.30**	-.18*	-.31**	.25**	-.29**
HT1					-.54**	.59**	.47**	-.38**	.45**
TA1						-.16*	-.32*	.35**	-.19**
EA1							.28**	-.22**	.64**
HT2								-.63**	.66**
TA2									-.44**
α		.83	.87	.91	.88	.85	.93	.86	.86
Mean	Men	30.20 (8.63)	20.00 (10.13)	28.14 (5.71)	22.60 (5.20)	26.26 (6.01)	26.21 (6.60)	22.21 (6.25)	24.90 (6.73)
(SD)	Women	29.91 (7.90)	25.30 (8.00)	27.40 (5.40)	24.40 (5.70)	27.80 (5.50)	25.24 (6.02)	21.70 (5.54)	26.27 (6.10)
	Overall	29.96 (8.02)	24.26 (8.68)	27.54 (5.41)	24.05 (5.68)	27.50 (5.61)	25.42 (6.13)	21.80 (5.67)	26.01 (6.27)
Skewness	Men	.19	.15	0.20	.00	-.22	-.09	.10	.40
	Women	-.35	-.15	-.27	-.30	-.13	-.07	.14	.02
	Overall	-.22	.22	-.20	-.22	-.17	-.06	.14	.08
Kurtosis	Men	-.19	.36	-.84	-.32	-.39	-.21	-.77	-.39
	Women	-.03	.22	-.54	-.25	-.49	-.47	.35	-.34
	Overall	-.07	.29	-.58	-.32	-.44	-.42	.06	-.41
Minimum–maximum	Men	15–50	1–48	16–39	11–33	13–37	11–38	11–35	13–39
	Women	10–50	3–46	13–39	9–35	13–40	13–38	9–36	10–40
	Overall	10–50	1–48	13–39	9–35	13–40	11–38	9–36	10–40

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.001$.

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