



International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology

www.elsevier.es/ijchp



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Age of anxiety and depression revisited: A meta-analysis of two European community samples (1964-2015)

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Received 2 October 2017; accepted 7 February 2018

KEYWORDS

Mental health;
Europe;
Temporal course;
Society;
Meta-analysis

Abstract *Background/Objective:* Based on studies using established psychometric scales, Twenge and coworkers have shown substantial increases in trait anxiety, depressive symptoms and neuroticism in North American population samples since the 1950s. Similar analyses for European samples have not yet been conducted. Our study therefore examined whether similar secular trends exist in German-speaking and British non-clinical samples together with possible connected societal factors. *Method:* A literature search identified 131 studies ($N = 63,269$) using the STAI, BDI or EPI in non-clinical samples between 1964 and 2015. Seven societal factors from national statistics were included. We conducted meta-analyses with displayed means and moderation analyses of publication year for all scales. *Results:* In contrast to North America results, anxiety, depression and neuroticism showed no increase in the two European populations. Publication year correlated negatively with and moderated trait anxiety (GER) and neuroticism (UK). Most societal factors were highly correlated with year of publication. Trait anxiety and neuroticism were significantly predicted by age at marriage and unemployment rate in German-speaking countries. *Conclusion:* The difference in secular trends between European and North American samples may indicate society specific developments connected to different societal factors.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijchp.2018.02.002>

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Please cite this article in press as: Schürmann, J., & Margraf, J. Age of anxiety and depression revisited: A meta-analysis of two European community samples (1964-2015). *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijchp.2018.02.002>

PALABRAS CLAVE

Salud mental;
Europa;
curso temporal;
sociedad;
meta-análisis

Curso temporal de la ansiedad y la depresión: meta-análisis de dos muestras comunitarias europeas (1964-2015)

Resumen *Antecedentes/Objetivo:* En base a estudios que usan escalas psicométricas establecidas, Twenge y colegas han mostrado aumentos sustanciales en la ansiedad rasgo, los síntomas depresivos y el neuroticismo en muestras de población norteamericana desde los años 1950. Análisis similares no se han realizado para muestras europeas. Este estudio examina si tendencias seculares existen en muestras no clínicas de habla alemana y británica, junto con posibles factores sociales conexos. *Método:* Una búsqueda de literatura identificó 131 estudios (N = 63.269) utilizando el STAI, BDI o EPI en muestras no clínicas, 1964-2015. Se incluyeron siete factores sociales de las estadísticas nacionales. Realizamos meta-análisis con medias y análisis de moderación del año de publicación para las escalas. *Resultados:* En contraste con los resultados norteamericanos, ansiedad, depresión y neuroticismo no han mostrado un aumento en las dos poblaciones europeas. El año de publicación se correlacionó negativa y moderadamente con la ansiedad (GER) y neuroticismo (UK). Ansiedad y neuroticismo fueron predichas significativamente por la edad en el matrimonio y la tasa de desempleo en los países de habla alemana. *Conclusión:* La diferencia en las tendencias seculares entre las muestras europeas y norteamericanas puede indicar desarrollos específicos de la sociedad relacionados con diferentes factores sociales.

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Everything was better in the good old days – in the minds of many people the modern world is characterized by insecurity. General media as well as academic journals frequently raise the question whether people's feeling of insecurity has increased over the years. Several authors claim that worries about overall security, job safety, finances and other social aspects grew in the 20th century (e. g., Beck, 1992; Rosen, 1998; Sloan, 1996). Such temporal developments could influence general anxious, depressive and neurotic traits. The examination of these traits in the general public is highly relevant since several studies have identified high trait anxiety, depressive symptoms and neuroticism to be predictors for psychological disorders, most commonly anxiety disorders and Major Depression (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004; Jenny, Pachur, Williams, Becker, & Margraf, 2013; Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010; Lukat, Becker, Lavalée, van der Veld, & Margraf, 2017; Ormel et al., 2013; Schneider, In-Albon, Nuendel, & Margraf, 2013; Woud, Zhang, Becker, McNally, & Margraf, 2014; Zinbarg et al., 2016).

An outstanding study by Twenge (2000) showed that anxiety and neuroticism in American students have constantly increased from 1952 to 1993, by evaluating publications that captured these constructs. Two other cohort studies by this author showed a significant increase in depressive symptoms and general psychopathology in the North American population over generations (Twenge, 2015; Twenge et al., 2010). Other authors also found evidence for an increase in various mental health issues in adults in the U.S. (Newsom, Archer, Trumbetta, & Gottesman, 2003; Swindle Jr, Heller, Pescosolido, & Kikuzawa, 2000) and children and adolescents internationally (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014). Furthermore, a current review demonstrated an increase of hopelessness in North American, Australian and European students (Lester, 2013). There is also evidence that societal

factors are associated with the increase in the considered traits. Thus, anxiety scores are significantly correlated with feelings of threat, economic conditions and low social connectedness in the North American population (Brand, 2015; Clark, Georgellis, & Sanfey, 2001; Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam, & Jetten, 2014; Twenge, 2000). Furthermore, an increase in narcissism in the last decades was found which could be connected to the increase in anxiety and depression (Twenge, 2014; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Keith Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

In contrast, several studies did not show such temporal developments of anxious and depressive traits across cohorts (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2003; Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006; McMartin, Kingsbury, Dykxhoorn, & Colman, 2014; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002). Furthermore, there are only few studies that examined the development of these traits in other Western countries. We found six studies that examined temporal changes in Europe. Four cohort studies showed an increase in depressive symptoms in Belgium, a rise in depressive and anxious symptoms in English adolescents, as well as increased anxiety in Slovenia and Finland over the last decades (Brault, Meuleman, & Bracke, 2012; Collishaw, Maughan, Natarajan, & Pickles, 2010; Kozina, 2014; Lindfors, Solantaus, & Rimpelä, 2012). In contrast to these findings, Meertens, Scheepers, and Tax (2003) showed no linear trend for depressive symptoms from 1975 to 1996 in the Netherlands. Furthermore, higher depression was only related to groups of people with low income, long-time unemployment or who were not married (Meertens et al., 2003). Evidence by Bremberg (2015) showed a country-specific increase of different mental health issues in Swedish adolescents, but not in the other Nordic countries or the Netherlands. Relating to pos-

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