

Personal Distress and Response to Ambiguous Emotions

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INTRODUCTION

- The scale of Personal Distress (PD) characterizes the tendency towards experiencing a high level of stress in during intense emotional situations [1].
- Prior studies have shown that higher PD is associated with higher social dysfunction, anxiety, and fearfulness [1,2,3,4,5].
- It is currently unknown if PD is associated with the interpretation of ambiguous emotional stimuli and/or the speed at which people make emotion-based decisions
- We predicted that higher PD scores would be associated with a negative emotional bias during the interpretation of ambiguous emotional stimuli. Furthermore, we predicted that higher PD scores would be associated with a tendency to make emotional based decisions more quickly.

Methods

Participants

59 healthy participants (24 male/ 35 female). Mean Age = 20.69 years, SD = 2.61

Measures

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI); [6]
Demographic Form

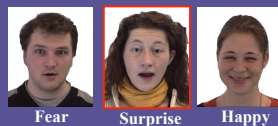
Procedure

Participants completed a task in which they were instructed to view videos of people and to respond whether they believed the person in the video had received good or bad news as quickly as possible. The groups of stimuli used for this experiment were neutral faces that gradually morphed into either fearful, happy, or surprised faces. The surprised videos acting as an ambiguous set of stimuli.

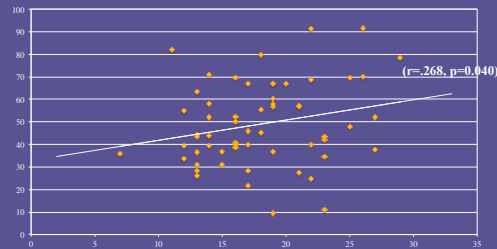
The primary metric of this study was the proportion of surprised videos interpreted as being of people "receiving bad news." In addition, we quantified the time taken to make each decision (RT: Reaction Time).

Analysis

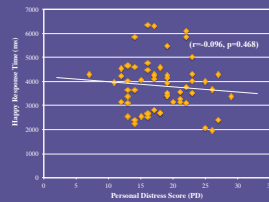
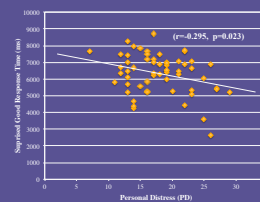
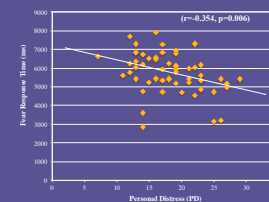
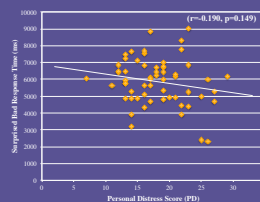
Statistical analysis were conducted Using IBM SPSS Version 21.



Results



People who are higher in PD interpret ambiguous emotional stimuli as more negative.



CONCLUSIONS

- PD score was positively correlated with a tendency towards interpreting ambiguous (surprised) faces in a negative way.
- This supports the hypothesis that higher Personal Distress confers people with an overall negative emotional bias.
- We observed a statistical trend that higher Personal Distress is associated with a tendency to make quick emotional based decisions, across different emotions.
- Within each emotion, we found that Personal Distress is associated with both reaction time when responding to fearful face videos and when making positive emotional judgments during surprised videos.
- These findings strengthen existing models linking Personal Distress with mood and anxiety disorders [5] and motivate further research on individual differences in emotional decision making.

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