Negative Emotionality and Eating Disorder Symptomatology: The Moderating Role of Effortful Control

Nicole M. Burt, Lauren E. Boddy, Kelly Polz, Natalie M. Ckuj, Taylor Koegel, & David J. Bridgett
Northern Illinois University

Hypotheses

- Previous studies examining risk factors for the development of eating disorder (ED) pathology in emerging adults have suggested that:
  - Higher levels of negative emotionality (NE) is linked to increased ED symptomatology.
  - NE may contribute to increased ED symptomatology via heightened negative self-evaluations of one’s body shape and size.
  - Difficulties with self-regulation may be related to increases ED pathology, such as bingeing and purging.
  - However, not all studies have replicated these findings.

- Importantly, no studies were identified that have considered the possibility that NE and self-regulation may interact to predict ED pathology.

- Specifically, high NE may be related to ED pathology in the context of problematic low self-regulation.
- Good self-regulation may protect individuals with heightened NE from engaging in problematic eating behaviors.
- In contrast, poor self-regulation may put individuals with high NE at risk to engage in problematic eating behaviors.

- Given prior research and limitations of such research, the goal of the present study is to examine contributions of NE and effortful control (EC; a temperamental aspect of self-regulation) to ED symptoms in a sample of male and female emerging adults.

- In addition, given recent calls for examination of temperament by temperament interactions, EC will be examined as a moderator of the relationship between NE and ED symptoms.

Methods & Materials

- One hundred sixty-four emerging adults (n = 164; 79 males, 85 females; mean age = 19.73) recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a Midwestern university participated in the current study.

- Fifty-five percent of the sample reported being a minority.

- Emerging adults completed measures of:
  - Adult negative emotionality - Adult Temperament Questionnaire (ATQ)®
  - Effortful control - Adult Temperament Questionnaire (ATQ)®
  - A measure of eating disorder symptomatology - Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q)®
  - Child trauma history - The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)®

Results

- After controlling for a history of childhood trauma and gender, NE (b = .16, p > .09) and EC (b = -.17, p = .07), although trends in the anticipated direction, did not significantly predict eating pathology.

- However, the interaction of NE and EC was significant, such that high NE was related to ED symptoms in the context of low EC (b* = -.13, p < .05).

- Tests of simple slopes revealed that at -1 SD from the mean (low EC), the effect of NE on ED pathology was significant (b* = -.20, p < .05), while at +1 SD from the mean (high EC), the effect of NE on ED pathology was not significant (b* = .03, p > .05).

Conclusions

- The current study expands previous literature examining temperamental traits associated with the development of ED symptomatology.

- Results of this study demonstrate the possible interactive effects of NE and EC in eating disorder pathology.

- NE emerged as a significant predictor of ED symptomatology, but only in the context of low EC.

- The results suggest that the mixed findings in the literature regarding the role of self-regulation plays in eating pathology may be due to the interactive effect of NE and EC.

- This is the only study, to our knowledge, that examines a temperament by temperament interaction in predicting disordered eating patterns.

- Interventions targeting self-regulation may benefit young adults at risk for ED symptomatology, especially those with high levels of NE.

- Future research could expand the current study by considering other aspects of temperament/personality and self-regulatory abilities in the development of abnormal eating patterns.

References