Psychological reactance: Effects of age and gender

Abstract (Summary)
A self-report, attitudinal questionnaire was administered to 1,717 adult Australians between 18 and 40 years old to examine the effects of age and gender on psychological reactance. Analysis yielded a significant age effect: As age increased, the level of reactance tended to decrease. No significant differences in reactance emerged in relation to gender. A significant interaction between age and gender was found.

Full Text (2099 words)

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"ASSAIL MY SENSE of personal control by telling me I cannot do something and I will want to do it all the more" (Phares, 1991, p. 473). This quotation clearly illustrates the essence of psychological reactance, a motivational state brought about when a person's freedom is threatened or eliminated (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). An attempt to restore this freedom can be made by exhibiting opposition or by resisting the pressure to conform (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Calhoun & Accella, 1990).

According to Austin (1989), there are two basic elements in reactance theory: freedoms and threats. Freedoms are related to perceived free behaviors that an individual recognizes and perceives to be executable, whereas threats are forces on the individual that prevent freedoms from being exercised. In earlier research, Brehm and Brehm (1981) categorized threats into two categories—internal and external. An internal threat is created by individuals, whereas an external threat is generated by external forces.

Recently, Hong and Page (1989) proposed that reactance is an enduring personality trait that is measurable, and hence they developed the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale, which measures four underlying factors: freedom of choice, conformity reactance, behavioral freedom, and reactance to advice and recommendations. Thus, the scale includes items covering the two elements of reactance and the two types of threats. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of age and gender on psychological reactance by using Hong's scale.

The relationship between age and psychological reactance has seldom been documented. Most previous studies (Hong, 1990; Joubert, 1990) have focused on university students, and consequently, the average age of the participants has been relatively young. Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, DeVoe, and Schoebertlein (1989) found age differences in maturity in terms of control strategies and in coping with life events. Thus, aging generally fostered better control over emotions and strategies in handling freedom-threatening situations and reducing reactance (Hong, in press). Therefore, an inverse relationship between age and psychological reactance was expected in the present study; that is, younger individuals were expected to exhibit more reactance than older individuals.

Brehm and Brehm (1981) suggested that there is no reason to assume that reactance is gender specific or that one gender exhibits higher levels of reactance than the other. This view was supported by Hong and Page (1989) and Hong (1990), who found no significant gender differences in psychological reactance for university student populations. However, Joubert (1990) reported that men scored higher than women on Hong's reactance scale in a small sample of American university students. In line with the majority of previous studies, we expected that gender would not be associated with levels of psychological reactance.

Method

Data were collected from a sample of 1,749 adult respondents residing in Sydney, Australia. Thirty-two subjects were eliminated because they did not answer in the correct manner or did not fully complete the questionnaire. The final sample then consisted of 815 men and 902 women, whose ages ranged from 18 to 40 years, with a mean age of
24.91. Subjects were classified into three age groups: 18 to 23 years, 24 to 29 years, and 30 to 40 years, consisting of 1,011, 321, and 385 subjects, respectively. A greater proportion of subjects between 18 and 23 years were from the University of Western Sydney: 452 respondents were students, and 306 were nonstudents.

Reactance was measured by using the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (Hong & Page, 1989), consisting of 14 items, for example, "Regulations trigger a sense of resistance in me" (Item 1), "I become angry when my freedom of choice is restricted" (Item 8), "Advice and recommendations usually induce me to do just the opposite" (Item 9), and "I am contented only when I am acting of my own free will" (Item 10). The scale's four-dimensional factorial structure has previously been found to be stable over two different populations—university students and the general public (Hong, 1992; Hong & Page, 1989). In addition, the scale has acceptable reliability, with a test-retest coefficient of .89 over a 2-week period, a Cronbach's alpha of .77, and an omega value of .82 for the multidimensional nature of the scale.

The items on the survey were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In addition, the questionnaire contained items pertaining to subjects' age, gender, and whether or not they were university students.

All data were collected over two consecutive years. The survey was voluntarily completed by subjects, who were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of information provided. No time limitations were imposed; most subjects took approximately 15 min to complete the questionnaire.

Results

A 2 X 3 analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the effect of age and gender on psychological reactance. Means, standard deviations, number of subjects, and F ratios from the two-way ANOVA are presented in Table 1. (Table 1 omitted)

Initially, the age variable consisted of four groups: 18 to 23 years (M = 3.36), 24 to 29 years (M = 3.28), 30 to 34 years (M = 3.14), and 35 to 40 years (M = 3.17). However, the two oldest groups displayed no significant difference in level of reactance, and so they were combined.

As age increased, the level of psychological reactance tended to decrease. However, a subsequent multiple comparison procedure (Scheff test) showed that the two younger age groups were not significantly different, although they displayed significantly higher reactance than the oldest group. No significant difference in mean reactance level was observed for gender. There emerged, however, a significant interaction, F(2, 1711) = 4.47, p < .05, between gender and age.

Discussion

As hypothesized, younger subjects tended to display more reactance than older subjects. A significant difference was observed between each of the younger age groups (18-23 years old and 24-29 years old) and the oldest group (30-40 years old). One explanation for this may be that the maturity that comes with life experience enables individuals to view fewer situations as freedom threatening, thus reducing reactance levels. Brehm and Brehm (1981) also proposed that older individuals are better equipped for various dimensions of reactance, such as the establishment of a freedom, prioritizing the importance of a freedom, competence in exercising a freedom, and being more motivated in the exertion of a freedom.

Furthermore, constraints placed on people at various ages may facilitate changes in reactance levels. Greater parental and institutional constraints may increase levels of reactance in younger individuals. These constraints may induce younger people to perceive that they hold very little control over their lives, resulting in a higher level of reactance. As one ages and establishes an independent lifestyle, the accompanying cognitive and social development fosters a reduction in reactance. This tendency was highlighted by the lower mean reactance score recorded for the oldest age group in the present study.

Although the mean reactance scores of the two younger age groups were different (as shown in Table 1), the difference was not significant. (Table 1 omitted) This difference in level of reactance may be attributed to the fact that individuals in those age groups were experiencing different stages of similar life events. For example, the youngest subjects may have been only beginning to prepare themselves for working life, whereas the majority of subjects in the second youngest age group might still have been in the process of establishing their careers. In the third age group, reactance levels were significantly reduced when compared with those of the two younger age groups. Whether
reactance decreases further beyond the age of 40 is yet to be seen.

In the current study, the youngest age group included a large proportion of university students. It may be thought that, because of their university status, these subjects might have had significantly different levels of reactance than the nonstudent subjects in the same age group. However, a t test yielded no such difference, t(1009) = 0.39, indicating no impact of university education on reactance level. Therefore, we combined these two groups into the youngest age group (18-23 years old) for analysis.

As hypothesized, there was no significant overall gender difference in level of reactance. This finding clearly supports previous studies suggesting that psychological reactance is not gender specific (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Hong, 1990; Hong & Page, 1989). The only variation of this finding was reported by Joubert (1990), who found higher levels of reactance among men than among women. He explained this gender difference on the basis of socialization theory, in which dominant sex roles for men and women are theorized to value reactance differently. One may assume that this inconsistency could be due to cultural differences in the samples used. However, Joubert's study was based on small samples (69 women and 42 men). The current and previous findings strongly suggest that psychological reactance is a motivational trait that is present equally in men and women.

Alternatively, the lack of a gender difference in this study could have been due to changes in traditional sex roles, which are becoming more congruent and less diverse. Our interpretations are based on subjects' overall tendency to exhibit psychological reactance as measured by the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale. However, arousal of reactance in specific situations may be affected by the gender of the person involved (Joseph, Joseph, Barto, & McKay, 1992). Further studies are encouraged to focus on how reactance arousal is affected by gender in specific situations.

The current findings also showed a significant interaction between age and gender, indicating that the pattern of gender differences in reactance levels varied with age. More specifically, reactance levels in women decreased at a greater rate as age increased than did reactance levels in men. The mean scores for women were 3.37, 3.21, and 3.07 for the 18-23-, 24-29-, and 30-40-year-old age groups, respectively. The mean scores for men were 3.35, 3.34, and 3.26, respectively. Overall, men generally maintained higher mean reactance scores than women, with the exception of the youngest age group, in which women displayed slightly higher reactance levels than men did. It is difficult to explain this phenomenon. However, one tentative explanation may center around social sex roles. For example, socialization patterns and traditional sex role stereotypes generally emphasize that men stand up for their rights and fight for their freedoms, whereas women are encouraged to take a more subservient role. The youngest age groups displayed little gender difference compared with the older groups. This could have been due to a cohort difference in sex role socialization. That is, the older adults may have been socialized in terms of traditional sex roles, whereas the youngest adults' sex role conceptualizations may have been the result of a changing, more liberal socialization pattern.

In summary, age yielded significant differences in psychological reactance levels, but gender did not. However, an interaction effect emerged between the two variables, indicating gender differences based on age. Because we used a large sample, it is reasonable to assume that the current findings may be generalized to a wider population. In future research, specific effects of other demographic variables, such as cultural upbringing, employment status, ethnicity, area of residence, and rural versus urban settings, may be examined. Further research is also encouraged to investigate the possible effects of age and gender on the behavioral component of psychological reactance.

REFERENCES


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