A Pilot Study of Age Differences in Fear-Seeking vs. Fear-Avoiding Behaviors in a Naturally-Occurring Fear Event
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INTRODUCTION

Older Adults Prefer Positive Information
- Older adults (OA) prefer positive information over negative information in a lab setting (i.e., positivity effects; Mikels & Carstensen, 2005)
- The extent to which OA avoid negative events relevant for their health and safety is less clear
- The SAVI model suggests OA are particularly vigilant in avoiding high arousal negative circumstances because they are less able to recover from such events (Charles, 2010)

Attending to Negative Information is Important for Survival
- One lab study found OA do take in negative health-relevant information (Isaacowitz & Choi, 2012)
- Additionally, OA watch the news more than young adults (YA), even though it is mostly negative (Mares & Woodard, 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008)

Fear is Difficult to Study in the Lab
- It is difficult to induce fear using emotion-provoking stimuli (e.g., film clips) in a lab setting (Stanley & Isaacowitz, 2015)
- We took advantage of a naturally-occurring fearful event to study age differences in fear-seeking and fear-avoiding behaviors, during the outbreak of Ebola in 2014

GOAL: Test whether OA attend to fearful health information tied to an actual current threat

Hypotheses
1. We expected OA to seek out fear more than YA
2. We expected that OA would fear Ebola more than YA

METHOD

Participants
15 YA  \(M_{\text{age}} = 21.20, \ SD = 5.28 \)  33% female
13 OA  \(M_{\text{age}} = 68.69, \ SD = 4.77 \)  53% female

Procedure
- Participants told they could browse news articles on the computer screen while waiting
- Participants could read either a fear-enhancing or fear-reducing article on the Ebola outbreak
- Participants offered a hand sanitizer or Chap Stick after reading article
- Fear of Ebola Questionnaire

Fear of Ebola Questionnaire  \(\alpha = .79\)
1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely Often) Likert-type scale
How often in the past week:
- Did you fear that you could contract Ebola?
- Did you fear one of your loved ones could contract Ebola?
- Did you think about Ebola?
- How afraid are you of contracting Ebola?
\((\text{Not at all}) \) to (Extremely)

2014 EBOLA OUTBREAK TIMELINE

RESULTS

Age Differences in the Selection of Fear-Enhancing vs. Fear-Reducing Articles
Consistent with our prediction, OA were more likely to choose the fear-enhancing article while YA were more likely to choose the fear-reducing article,  \(\chi^2(2) = 3.43, \ p = .03\)

OA were more likely than YA to choose hand sanitizer over Chap Stick,  \(\chi^2(3) = 7.27, \ p = .03\).

OA reported greater fear of Ebola than YA,  \(t(26) = 2.47, \ p = .02\).

DISCUSSION

- It appears that older adults will interact with negative information that is relevant to their health and safety.
- These results suggest that investigating fear-related behaviors in young and older adults in naturally-occurring fearful situations may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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