
PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND AGING: EXECUTIVE FUNCTION PERFORMANCE ON THE CAMBRIDGE NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL TEST AUTOMATED BATTERY (CANTAB)

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Introduction: Early detection of cognitive change is essential for the diagnosis and timely onset of treatment in a variety of neuropsychiatric disorders. Since changes in executive function (EF) are contingent upon age and may compromise assessment accuracy, psychiatric patients and normal controls were compared in terms of cognitive decline rates. EF is measured with the Cambridge Neuropsychological Test Automated Battery (CANTAB), that has adapted several standard cognitive tests for computerized administration and scoring.

Objectives: Specification of the relation between psychopathology, cognition and aging.

Aims: Cross sectional examination of the age related executive changes in a sample of adults with a history of psychiatric illness using the CANTAB.

Methods: A total of 406 patients (18-72 years), diagnosed with (a) affective disorders (N=153), (b) substance related disorders (N=112), (c) personality disorders (N=82), or (d) pervasive developmental disorders (N=59), completed CANTAB executive function tests of working memory (SWM), strategic planning (SOC) and set shifting (IED). Test performances were compared with those of 52 healthy adults.

Results: Both in the patient groups and the healthy participants, similar rates of executive decline were found.

Conclusions: The present research indicates that the decline of executive skills in populations with psychiatric conditions does not exceed the age related executive changes typically seen in healthy aging adults. Still, compared with the latter, patients seem to earlier reach the critical threshold at which functional deficits emerge, notwithstanding the comparable decline rates. Understanding aging and its interaction with cognition in later life may refine treatment design for the elderly patient.