

Crying Frequency Predicts Stress and Physical Health After Controlling for Negative Affect

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Problem

The psychological and physical consequences of crying in adults have received limited attention in the scientific literature. The notion that crying may be cathartic has remained controversial and laboratory and self-report studies on the issue show have demonstrated mixed results. The purpose of this study was to examine adult crying behavior and explore whether crying frequency predicts self-reported psychological stress and physical health.

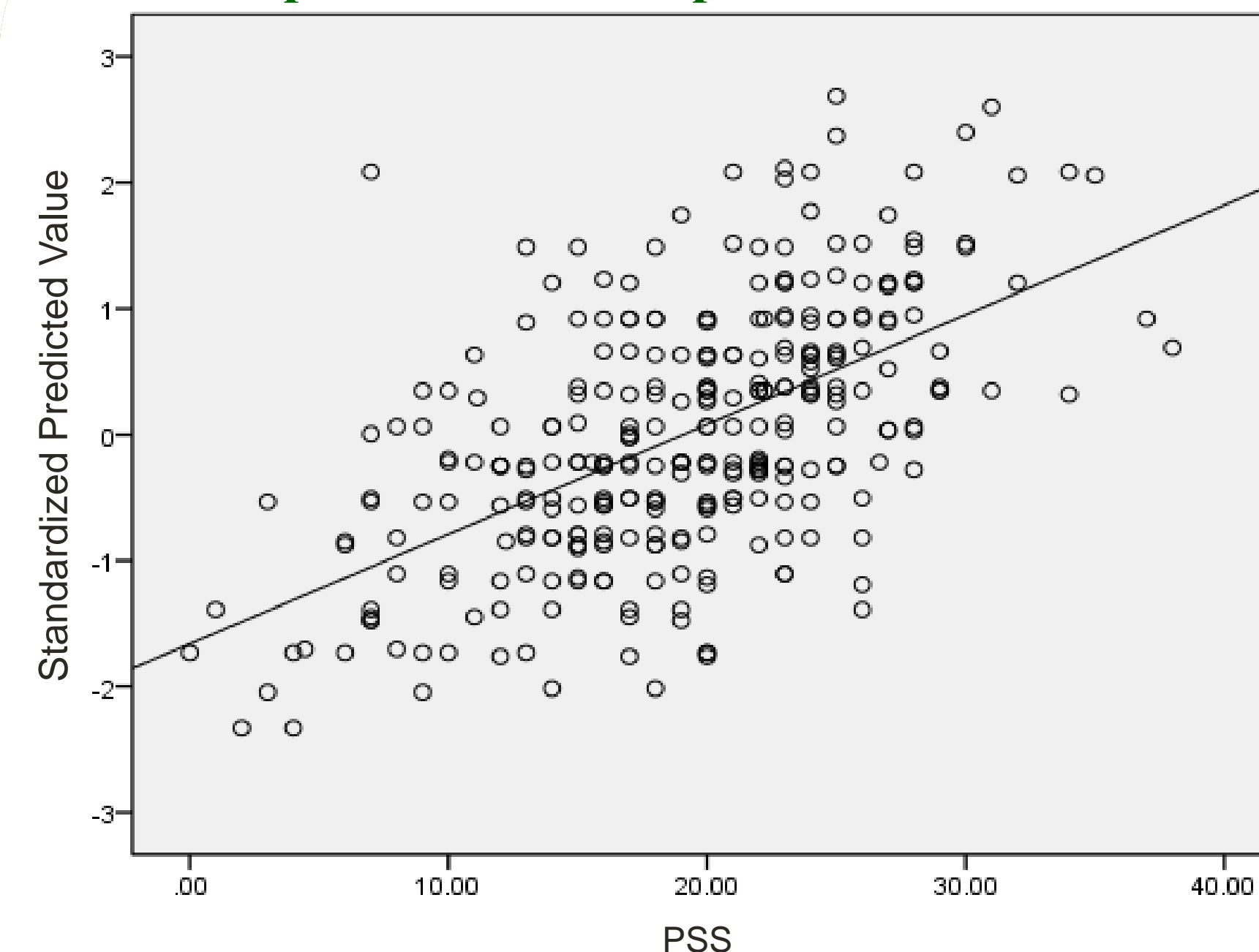
Method

Three hundred and forty undergraduate students completed an online survey that included the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), a self-report health/illness measures (the Cohen-Hoberman Inventory of Physical Symptoms [CHIPS]), and a measure of negative affect (the International Positive and Negative Affect Scale [I-PANAS-SF]). Participants also responded to a series of statements about their crying behavior and attitudes, including a question about crying frequency: "Thinking about your average crying behavior over the past few years how frequently do you cry?" with eight sequential answer options ranging from "Never" to "Every Day". Participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 ($M=22.6$, $SD=5.5$). Approximately three-fourths of the sample (75.5%) was female and the large majority (93%) of participants classified themselves as Hispanic.

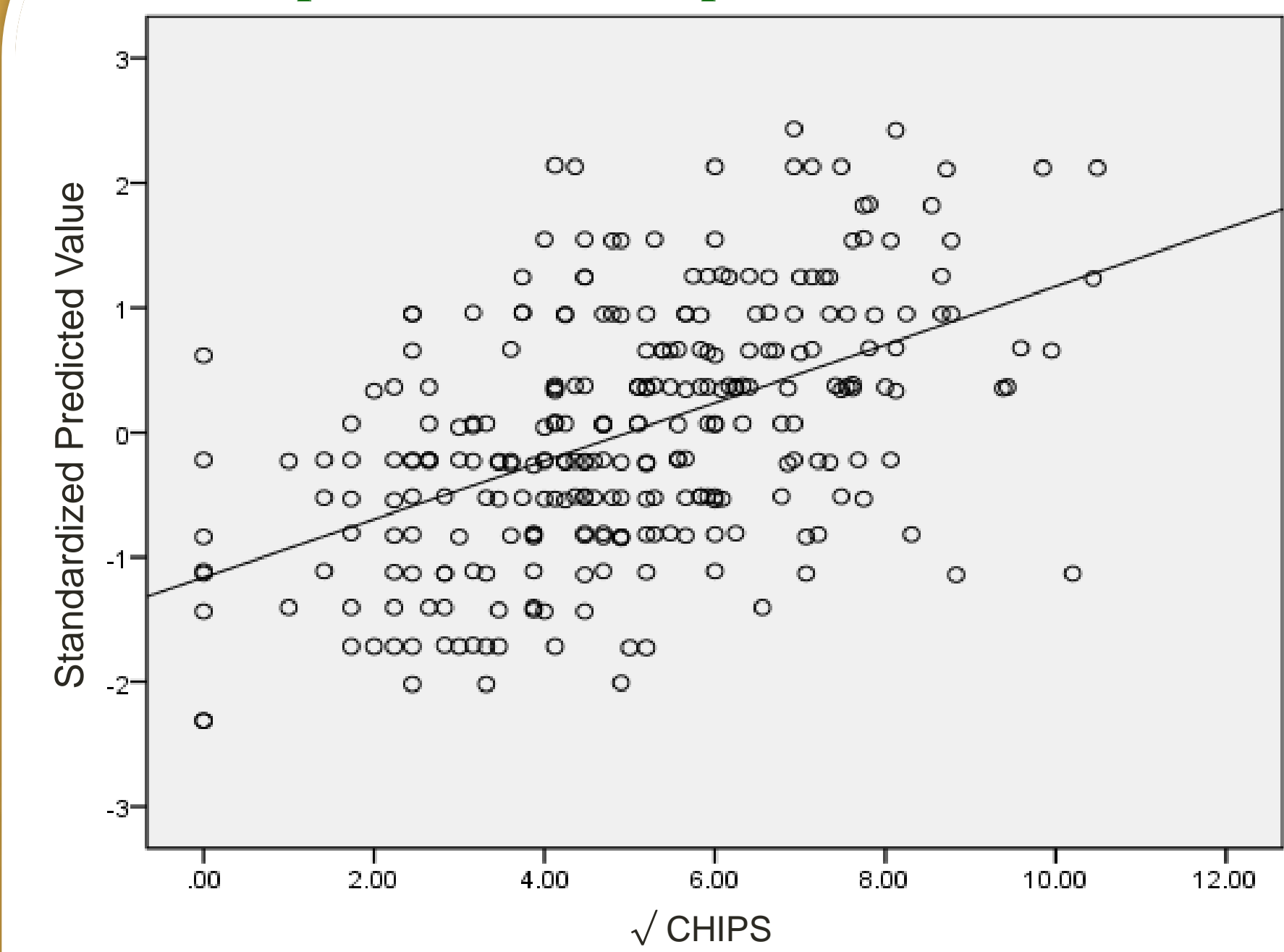
Results

- Self-perceived stress and health were highly correlated ($r(207) = .4$, $p < .001$). Compared to males, females reported more frequent crying ($t(1, 304) = -12.381$, $p < .001$), poorer health ($t(1,279) = -3.861$, $p < .001$), and higher stress ($t(1, 326) = -5.019$, $p < .001$).
- In females, more frequent crying was associated with higher stress ($r(230) = .31$, $p < .001$) and poorer health ($r(204) = .23$, $p < .001$). In males, more frequent crying was associated with higher stress ($r(75) = .21$, $p < .04$), but was not significantly associated with health.
- Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to examine whether health and stress could be predicted by crying frequency after controlling for negative affect and gender. Gender and negative affect were entered at the first step of each model, crying frequency at the second step. Results indicated that, when controlling for gender and negative affect, crying frequency accounted for an additional 2% of the variance in health scores and 2% of the stress scores, both representing statistically significant increases in R-squared. In the final models, the combined predictor variables accounted for 32% of the variance in stress and 25% of the variance in health; both significant at $p < .05$. In both of the final models, gender was not a significant predictor of health or stress, but negative affect and crying frequency were ($p < .05$); higher crying frequency was associated with both poorer physical health and greater psychological stress.

Negative affect and crying frequency as predictors of self-perceived STRESS



Negative affect and crying frequency as predictors of self-perceived HEALTH



Conclusion

Those who cry more frequently report poorer health and greater stress than those who cry less often, even when controlling for negative affect. However, the data do not negate the possibility that those who regulate their crying behavior (suppress crying) may show poorer health and higher stress; additional research will need to address whether suppression of experienced negative emotion is associated with poorer health.

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