



Age-moderation of genetic and environmental contributions to cognitive functioning in mid- and late-life for specific cognitive abilities

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ABSTRACT

Age moderation of genetic and environmental contributions to Digits Forward, Digits Backward, Block Design, Symbol Digit, Vocabulary, and Synonyms was investigated in a sample of 14,534 twins aged 26 to 98 years. The Interplay of Genes and Environment across Multiple Studies (IGEMS) consortium contributed the sample, which represents nine studies from three countries (USA, Denmark, and Sweden). Average test performance was lower in successively older age groups for all tests. Significant age moderation of additive genetic, shared environmental, and non-shared environmental variance components was observed, but the pattern varied by test. The genetic contribution to phenotypic variance across age was smaller for both Digit Span tests, greater for Synonyms, and stable for Block Design and Symbol Digit. The non-shared environmental contribution was greater with age for the Digit Span tests and Block Design, while the shared environmental component was small for all tests, often more so with age. Vocabulary showed similar age-moderation patterns as Synonyms, but these effects were nonsignificant. Findings are discussed in the context of theories of cognitive aging.

1. Introduction

Cross-sectional and longitudinal research has consistently found that average cognitive test performance declines in late life (Salthouse, 2009). Nonetheless, there are marked individual differences in the timing and rate of cognitive aging, and late-life cognitive function is relatively etiologically distinct from cognitive function at earlier ages (Wilson et al., 2002). Late-life general cognitive ability (GCA) is also moderately to strongly heritable, with minimal shared environmental contributions (Johnson, McGue, & Deary, 2014). An important but largely unaddressed question concerns whether the magnitudes of genetic and environmental contributions to late-life cognitive ability

differ from those at earlier life stages.

A prominent finding from the behavioral genetic literature is that heritability of behavioral phenotypes increases with age. In a meta-analysis of relevant twin studies, Bergen, Gardner, and Kendler (2007) reported that heritability of diverse behavioral phenotypes including anxiety, externalizing psychopathology, social attitudes, and GCA all increased with age. Other research has documented age-related declines in the importance of shared environmental influences for GCA (Haworth et al., 2010). There are, however, several important limitations in this literature. First, most of the research has focused on transitions from childhood to early adulthood; much less is known about the magnitudes of genetic and environmental contributions beyond

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early adulthood (Tucker-Drob & Briley, 2014). Second, research on cognitive transitions from childhood to early adulthood has focused almost exclusively on GCA rather than specific cognitive abilities, despite evidence of domain specific variation in their developmental trajectories. Third, most of the research has focused on standardized, rather than raw, components of variance. Greater heritability, a standardized metric, may be a consequence of less raw environmental contribution to variance, greater genetic variance, or both.

The magnitudes of genetic and environmental contributions to late-life cognitive function might differ from those at earlier ages for several reasons. Reduction in evolutionary pressures in late life as compared to other life stages is posited to lead to amplification of stochastic (i.e., random, Finch & Kirkwood, 2000) and epigenetic processes (Fraga et al., 2005). For example, many individual-level factors (i.e., blood pressure, and physical exercise) are associated with late-life cognitive functioning but not with cognitive status at younger ages (Anstey & Christensen, 2000). The cumulative effect of these factors might be reflected by increased environmental contributions to phenotypic variance with age (c.f., Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Alternatively, changes in the magnitudes of genetic contributions may reflect amplification of existing genetic factors or mechanisms of gene-environment interplay (Reynolds, Finkel, & Zavala, 2013). For instance, genetic factors that protect against environmental influences leading to cognitive decline (e.g., active developmental processes, Scarr & McCartney, 1983) can lead to greater genetic variance in late life. High educational attainment, occupational complexity, and intellectually-stimulating activities may reflect genetically influenced selections that promote cognitive reserve and prevent decline (Bosma et al., 2002).

Behavioral genetic research on cognitive abilities does not always provide consistent evidence for age differences in relative magnitudes of genetic influences. Finkel and Reynolds (2010) reviewed the behavioral genetic literature on cognitive aging and concluded that heritability of GCA appears to increase through approximately age 60 and declines thereafter. Yet, in a subsequent large cross-sectional study of 2332 Danish twins age 46 to 96 years, McGue and Christensen (2013) reported that the magnitude of genetic influence on a measure of GCA was stable across age. Unlike the differential patterns observed by independent studies, recent meta-analyses of twin studies have better convergence to the patterns observed. In a recent meta-analysis of twin studies, Reynolds and Finkel (2015) reported that the heritabilities of specific cognitive abilities including verbal, spatial and memory, were largely stable or slightly increasing with age. Similarly, a large-scale meta-analysis of all published twin studies by Polderman et al. (2015) also found consistent evidence for stable heritability across age groups across cognitive domains of clustered executive functioning and memory abilities. Although these meta-analyses seem to provide a clearer and more consistent pattern of the genetic and environmental contributions to late life, they may be also obscuring differential trajectories for specific cognitive abilities, and indeed losing important informative differences across time.

Limited sample sizes and study and country differences may contribute to the apparent inconsistency of results concerning age moderation of genetic influences. In many cases, heritability of late-life cognitive ability is estimated in samples with a few hundred twin pairs, making it difficult for a single study to distinguish heritability differences across a wide age range reliably. Moreover, studies do not always report parameter estimates for the same biometric model, making it difficult to compare estimates using meta-analytic methods. For example, the shared environmental contribution is not always reported and some reported heritability estimates are based on models dropping this component.

This study includes 14,534 participants from a twin study consortium to investigate age moderation of genetic and environmental influences on cognitive ability in mid- through late-life. The large sample, broad age range (26 to 98 years), and multiple cognitive abilities included (six tests representing four separate domains of cognitive

functioning – short-term/working memory, processing speed, spatial processing, and verbal ability) make this the most comprehensive test to date of the hypothesis that the magnitudes of genetic and environmental influences on cognitive functioning differ in late-life compared to earlier life stages. In addition, the consortium this study is derived from provides a special opportunity to directly assess differential evidence found by independent studies, often from competing independent studies that are included in this consortium group, while simultaneously examining if there are informative differences across time that meta-analytic work may not have been able to observe.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample was drawn from nine studies representing three separate countries (Sweden, Denmark, and the United States) from the Interplay of Genes and Environment across Multiple Studies (IGEMS) consortium (Pedersen et al., 2013). No studies had overlapping participants. To be included in our analysis, participants had to have completed at least one of six cognitive tests (described below), and have a Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) score of at least 24, following the typical cutoff for cognitive impairment (Tombaugh & McIntyre, 1992). A total of 1136 (7.8% of the total number of potential participants) were excluded based on this screen, leaving a sample of 14,534 (50.9% women) individual twins. The sample included 2341 pairs of monozygotic (MZ) twins, 2429 pairs of dizygotic-same sex twins (DZ-ss), and 929 pairs of dizygotic-opposite sex twins (DZ-os). The sample also included 3128 unpaired twins, who were informative with respect to age differences in means and variances and so were included in the analyses. For studies with longitudinal assessments, only data from the first test administration for each participant were used in the cross-sectional analyses reported here. Mean age at that measurement occasion was 61.3 years (Mdn = 59.82, $SD = 13.0$). The median was slightly lower than the mean, suggesting a positive skew, although the difference is about a one tenth of a SD. Demographic characteristics for each study, including sample size, gender ratio, age, zygosity and which cognitive tests were administered, are given in Table 1. Fig. 1 gives the age distribution of the total sample. Brief descriptions of each of the nine studies, separated by country of origin, are given below. Additional details concerning the methodology for each study can be found in the citations provided.

2.1.1. Sweden

IGEMS includes four Swedish studies whose samples were all ascertained from records from the Swedish Twin Registry: Swedish Adoption/Twin Study of Aging (SATSA; Pedersen et al., 1991), Aging in Women and Men (GENDER; Gold, Malmberg, McClearn, Pedersen, & Berg, 2002), Origins of Variance in the Oldest-Old (OCTO-Twin; McClearn et al., 1997), and Twin-Offspring Study in Sweden (TOSS; Neiderhiser, Reiss, Lichtenstein, Spotts, & Ganiban, 2007). Parallel cognitive assessments were used across SATSA, OCTO-Twin and GENDER, and all three studies were longitudinal. The Swedish studies are distinguished by the age range and zygosity represented. SATSA participants include same-sex twins, with a subsample of twins reared apart matched to a subsample of twins reared together by birthdate and county of birth and gender. SATSA in-person testing protocol (IPT) followed a cohort-sequential protocol. Those who had reached age 50 were invited to participate in IPT that began in 1986. At subsequent IPTs, typically conducted at 3-year intervals, SATSA-eligible twins who reached age 50 were invited to participate. Intake cognitive data were collected over four IPT sessions. The age range at initial cognitive testing was 50.0 to 88.0.

GENDER consists of opposite sex twin pairs born between 1906 and 1925. Intake cognitive assessments were completed during a four-year period starting in 1995, when the twins were between 70 and 81 years

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the twin samples.

| Study | N | % Female | # Of complete twin pairs | | | Mean age (SD) | Cognitive test |
|------------------------|-------|----------|--------------------------|-------|-------|---------------|---------------------|
| | | | MZ | DZ-ss | DZ-os | | |
| Swedish studies | | | | | | | |
| SATSA | 788 | 59.5% | 142 | 221 | 0 | 63.6 (8.3) | DF,DB,BD,SD,SYN |
| GENDER | 447 | 50.8% | 0 | 0 | 205 | 74.5 (2.6) | BD,SD,SYN |
| OCTO-twin | 514 | 64.6% | 97 | 107 | 0 | 83.1 (2.8) | DF,DB,BD,SD,SYN |
| TOSS | 1732 | 62.9% | 380 | 475 | 0 | 44.8 (4.9) | SYN |
| Danish studies | | | | | | | |
| LSADT | 3480 | 57.2% | 325 | 467 | 0 | 76.0 (4.9) | DF,DB,SD |
| MADT | 4280 | 49.0% | 656 | 589 | 610 | 56.4 (6.3) | DF,DB,SD |
| US studies | | | | | | | |
| VETSA | 1230 | 0.0% | 347 | 263 | 0 | 55.4 (2.5) | DF,DB,VOC,SYN |
| MTSADA | 810 | 60.9% | 215 | 150 | 0 | 55.4 (12.6) | BD,SD,VOC |
| MIDUS | 1253 | 56.0% | 179 | 157 | 114 | 54.3 (11.6) | DB |
| Total | 14534 | 50.9% | 2341 | 2429 | 929 | 61.3 (13.0) | DF,DB,BD,SD,VOC,SYN |

Note: DF = Digits Forward, DB = Digits Backward, BD = Block Design, SD = Symbol Digit, VOC = Vocabulary, SYN = Synonyms, MZ = Monozygotic, DZ-ss = Dizygotic-same sex, DZ-os = Dizygotic-opposite sex.

old.

OCTO-Twin was initiated to investigate same sex twins in very late-life; at their intake assessment twins ranged in age from 79 to 98 years. OCTO-Twin participants completed their intake assessments during a two-year period beginning in 1991.

TOSS was designed to investigate the influences of family relationships within twin families, and so included same sex pairs in which both twins had a teenage child at the time of their intake assessments. Non-twin participants in TOSS, including spouses and offspring, were not included in our analyses. TOSS participants ranged in age from 32 to 59 years.

2.1.2. Denmark

The Danish twin studies include the Longitudinal Study of Aging Danish Twins (LSADT; Christensen, Holm, McGue, Corder, & Vaupel, 1999) and the Middle-Aged Danish Twins Study (MADT; Skytthe et al., 2013). The two Danish studies ascertained twins from the Danish Twin Registry and administered the same cognitive assessment. LSADT is a cohort-sequential study of same sex twin pairs that began in 1995. Initially, LSADT included twins aged 75 years or older, although as new cohorts were recruited, the age minimum was progressively dropped to 70, age ranges from 70 to 96 years. MADT is a longitudinal study of both same and opposite sex twin pairs born between 1931 and 1952 who were first assessed in 1998, when they ranged in age from 45 to 68 years.

2.1.3. United States

There are three US studies: the Vietnam Era Twin Study of Aging (VETSA; Kremen, Franz, & Lyons, 2013), the Minnesota Twin Study of Adult Development and Aging (MTSADA; Finkel & McGue, 1993), and the twin sample from Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS; Kendler, Thornton, Gilman, & Kessler, 2000). VETSA is a longitudinal study of a national sample of male twins who served in the military at some time during the Vietnam era (1965–1975) and were recruited through the Vietnam Era Twin Registry. Unlike the other studies, the VETSA sample falls within a restricted age range – all twins were between 51 and 60 years of age at initial assessment, and all twins are male. In MTSADA, twins from same sex twin pairs were ascertained through Minnesota state birth records. MTSADA is a longitudinal study that took place between 1984 and 1994 and included a broad age-range of twins (26 to 87 years at intake), with twins age 60 years and older preferentially recruited. MIDUS is a longitudinal study of a US national sample of middle-age adults that features a twin subsample. The twin sample includes both same and opposite sex twin pairs ascertained using a random-digit dialing procedure and supplemented with additional twin pairs recruited through referrals given by non-twin participants. The MIDUS twin sample ranged in age from 34 to 82 years at the time of cognitive assessment.

2.2. Measures and phenotypic harmonization

Many of the IGEMS studies administered specific cognitive measures

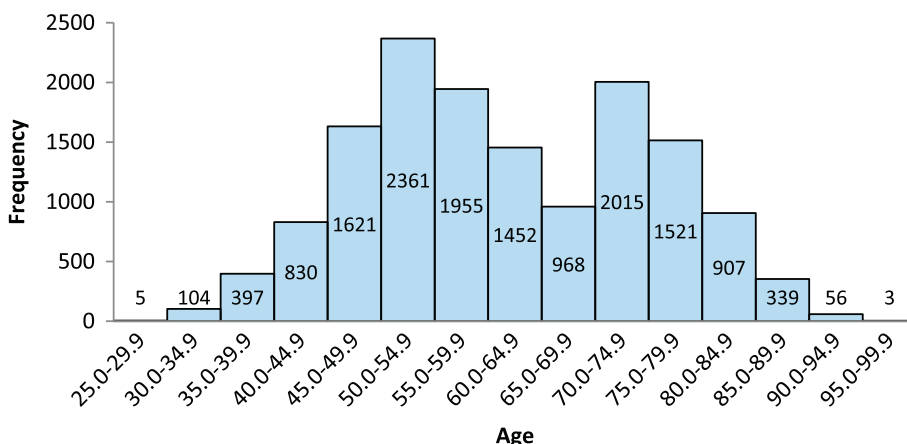


Fig. 1. Age distribution of the combined sample of 14,534 individual twins. To qualify for the analyses reported in this paper, a twin needed to complete at least one of the six target cognitive tests and have a MMSE score of at least 24.

in addition to those analyzed here. We made use of only those measures that could be harmonized across more than one study. This resulted in the inclusion of six different cognitive ability measures: Digits Forward, Digits Backward, Block Design, Symbol Digit, Vocabulary, and Synonyms. These tests covered four cognitive domains: short-term/working memory (Digits Forward and Digits Backward), spatial processing (Block Design), processing speed (Symbol Digit), and verbal comprehension (Synonyms and Vocabulary).

2.2.1. Digits forward

Five of the studies (SATSA, OCTO-Twin, LSADT, MADT and VETSA) administered a Digits Forward task (total N = 10,206). The two Swedish and two Danish studies used the same procedure, which involved reading a 3- to 9-digit number string and asking the respondent to repeat each string in the correct order as administered, but had different scoring. In Sweden, the score was the highest string length that the respondent correctly repeated so it could vary from 0 to 9; in Denmark the score was the total number of correctly repeated strings for both trials so it could vary from 0 to 14. The Digits Forward task used in VETSA was based on the Wechsler Memory Scale-III (WMS-III, [Wechsler, 1997](#)) Digit Span subtest. The same basic administration procedure was followed as in the Scandinavian studies, except strings ranged in length from 2 through 11. VETSA used the same scoring procedure as in the Danish studies, so that the total score could range from 0 to 20.

2.2.2. Digits backward

Six of the studies (SATSA, OCTO-Twin, LSADT, MADT, VETSA and MIDUS) administered a Digits Backward task (total N = 11,442), which required the respondent to repeat a sequence of numbers in the reverse order as presented. The same Digits Backward task, a string length ranging from 2 to 8, was used in the two Swedish and two Danish studies, with the same scoring in each study as was used for Digits Forward. The VETSA task was derived from the WMS-III and included two trials at each length from 2 through 10, scored as the total number of correctly repeated strings (varying from 0 to 18). The MIDUS task involved the same procedure, sequence lengths, and scoring as used in the Swedish studies, although it was administered over the telephone rather than in person ([Tun & Lachman, 2006](#)).

2.2.3. Block design

Four of the studies (SATSA, GENDER, OCTO-Twin and MTSADA) administered a Block Design task (total N = 2320). Block Design is a spatial processing task in which the respondent is asked to reproduce the target two-dimensional geometric shapes using sets of three-dimensional colored blocks. The three Swedish studies used the Kohs Block Design Test ([Stone, 1985](#)). There were seven separate trials, each scored on a 0 to 6 basis (scoring depending on the speed, efficiency, and accuracy with which the target was reproduced). In MTSADA, the Block Design subtest from the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R, [Wechsler, 1981](#)) was administered. This task is very similar to the one used in the other studies, except it involved a total of nine items, each scored for accuracy and speed and summed to give the total score.

2.2.4. Symbol digit (digit symbol)

Five studies (SATSA, GENDER, OCTO-Twin, LSADT, and MADT) administered a Symbol Digit task, while a sixth (MTSADA) administered a Digit Symbol task (total N = 8755). Both tasks measure perceptual speed and accuracy, and so were pooled in analyses reported here. For convenience we designate this combined task as Symbol Digit. The same task was administered in the three Swedish and two Danish studies. Respondents were given a key containing nine separate two-dimensional geometric symbols that were assigned specific digits between 1 and 9. They were then presented with rows of symbols and asked to state out loud what the correct digit was for each symbol. This

Symbol Digit task was administered in two blocks of 50 with 45 s allowed for each block. The score was the number of correct trials across the two blocks (varying from 0 to 100). In MTSADA, the Digit Symbol task from the WAIS-R ([Wechsler, 1981](#)) was administered. Respondents were asked to write down the symbol that corresponded with each target digit. There was one single administration of 90-second duration with a total possible score of 90.

2.2.5. Vocabulary

Two studies (VETSA and MTSADA) administered a Vocabulary test in which respondents were required to generate definitions of words (total N = 2030). In VETSA, the Vocabulary subtest from the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI; [Wechsler, 1999](#)) was administered, while MTSADA administered the Vocabulary subtest from the WAIS-R ([Wechsler, 1981](#)).

2.2.6. Synonyms

Five studies (SATSA, GENDER, OCTO-Twin, TOSS and VETSA) administered a Synonyms test (total N = 4523). In all cases, the Synonyms test required the respondent to select the word that provided the best synonym to a target word from a set of alternatives. The specific words, alternatives and number of items varied across studies.

2.3. Zygoty

The specific methods for zygoty determination varied somewhat from study to study but in most cases involved the use of questionnaires supplemented by DNA analysis to resolve uncertain cases. In all cases, regardless of the slight differences in methods to determine zygoty, methods have been validated for each study.

2.4. Scale harmonization

Because the numbers and difficulties of items, and scoring and administration procedures varied across studies, it was necessary to place cognitive test scores on a common metric while retaining information about age differences in means and variances. To start, we pooled cognitive tests for studies from the same country that had the same testing procedures. Thus, the two Danish studies were pooled together as were the four Swedish studies. In addition to reducing the number of samples to compare, pooling increased the age coverage within each pooled sample. The second step in harmonization involved dividing each study sample into four age groups: below 50, 50 to 59.99, 60 to 69.99, and 70 plus. These age groups were selected to provide adequate sample size in each age group and a single group (50 to 59.99) that existed for every test-study combination. The 50–59.99 group was then used to harmonize the differences in scale across the multiple tests for each of the six abilities. Specifically, for each test-study combination, after removing the main effect of sex, scores were linearly transformed to have a mean of 50.0 and standard deviation of 10.0 (i.e., a T-score metric) in the age 50 to 59.99 age group. In this way, we placed each test on the same scale while retaining information about variance differences across age. Finally, to minimize the impact of outlying observations, we winsorized scores within each age group such that scores greater than ± 3 SDs from the age group means were set equal to ± 3 SD as appropriate. The frequency of winsorized scores ranged from 0.18% for Block Design to 0.88% for Digits Forward. In a normal distribution we would expect 0.3% of scores to fall outside the ± 3 SDs range, so that there were slight excesses of cases in the tails of the distributions of some of the cognitive tests. To correct for multiple testing, we set the significance threshold at 0.01, a value slightly larger than the Bonferroni corrected value for 6 independent tests (i.e., $0.008 = 0.05/6$), because of the average inter-correlation among the cognitive measures was about 0.30.

Table 2
Mean (SD) cognitive test performance as a function of age group pooled across studies.

| Cognitive test | Age group \bar{x} (SD) N | | | | ANOVA results F (df) P | Age group effect size η^2 |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | < 50 | 50–59 | 60–69 | ≥ 70 | | |
| Digits forward | 50.8 (10.0) 785 | 50.0 (9.9) 3498 | 49.0 (9.6) 1812 | 48.7 (9.5) 4111 | 18.5 (3) p < .001 | 0.005 |
| Digits backward | 51.3 (10.1) 1281 | 50.0 (9.9) 3855 | 48.6 (9.7) 2065 | 46.4 (9.5) 4241 | 132.1 (3) p < .001 | 0.033 |
| Block design | 55.6 (9.8) 221 | 50.0 (9.9) 428 | 44.6 (10.4) 554 | 38.1 (9.6) 1117 | 287.1 (3) p < .001 | 0.271 |
| Symbol digit | 54.1 (9.1) 1024 | 49.9 (9.5) 2347 | 44.7 (10.0) 2104 | 36.2 (10.0) 3280 | 1353.2 (3) p < .001 | 0.317 |
| Vocabulary | 50.1 (9.7) 259 | 50.1 (9.8) 1357 | 47.0 (10.0) 353 | 45.9 (9.1) 61 | 12.4 (3) p < .001 | 0.018 |
| Synonyms | 48.8 (9.2) 1417 | 50.1 (9.6) 1836 | 44.6 (10.6) 293 | 42.8 (12.2) 977 | 126.4 (3) p < .001 | 0.077 |

Note: Scores were transformed within each study to have a mean of 50 and an SD of 10 in the 50–59 age group and then winsorized to $\pm 3SD$. ANOVA results take into account the clustering of the twin data.

2.5. Statistical analysis

We first estimated twin correlations in each of the four age groups, separately by study then pooled across studies. Twin correlations by sex were also examined, but no sex differences were found, thus sex was collapsed by zygosity group. Although we clearly lose information when a quantitative variable such as age is arbitrarily divided into discrete groups, these analyses allowed us to gain a preliminary sense for how twin similarity varied across age group and study. Second, we determined which biometric model (ACE or ADE) best fit the data for each test as seen in Table S2 of the supplement. The ACE model included additive genetic (A), shared environmental (C), and non-shared environmental (E) components of variance; in the ADE model the C component was replaced by a non-additive genetic (D) component. With reared-together twin data, C and D cannot be simultaneously estimated. Under these models, MZ twins share all additive genetic and non-additive genetic effects, while DZ twins share half of the additive effect and one-quarter of the non-additive effect. The shared environment represents the effects of environmental factors that contribute to twin similarity regardless of zygosity and so is shared equally by MZ

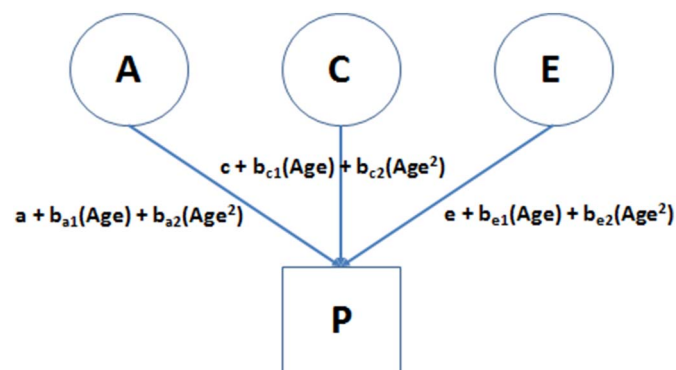


Fig. 2. Biometric age-moderation model fit to the twin data. A quantitative phenotype (P) is assumed to be a function of underlying additive genetic (A), shared environmental (C), and non-shared environmental (E) effects. Age moderation is incorporated into the model by allowing the effects of A, C or D (not depicted), and E to be a function of age and squared age.

and DZ twins. The nonshared environment represents those environmental factors (as well as measurement error) that contribute to twin differences and so is not shared by either MZ or DZ twins.

Lastly, our analyses involved fitting a series of age-moderated biometric models to the pooled twin data for each cognitive test treating age as a continuous variable. The general age-moderation model is depicted in Fig. 2 for one member of a twin pair. In this model, we assume that a quantitative phenotype (P) can be expressed as a function of the three factors in the ACE or ADE model, the effect of each potentially moderated by a quadratic function in age.

Because preliminary analysis of DZ twin correlations indicated that correlations for same sex and opposite sex pairs could be pooled without a significant increment in χ^2 , no distinction was made between the two types of DZ twins in the age-moderation analyses. For each cognitive outcome, seven models of increasing complexity were fit in Mx (Neale, Boker, Xie, & Maes, 2004): 1) no-age-moderation, 2) only the total phenotypic variance was moderated by age (i.e., a scalar moderation model implemented by allowing the phenotypic variance to increase as a logistic function of age but constraining the relative contributions of the three biometric components to be invariant across age), 3–5) linear age-moderation of one of the three biometric components only, 6) linear age-moderation model of all three biometric components, and 7) both linear and quadratic age moderation of all three biometric components. Model fit for the biometric models was evaluated using both the χ^2 goodness-of-fit test statistic and the Akaike Information Criteria ($AIC = 2\ln L + 2k$, where k is the number of estimated parameters), with models having lower AIC preferred.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive data

Mean test scores on the T-score scale by age group are reported in Table 2 and depicted in Fig. 3. Because of winsorization, the mean and SD in the age 50–59.99 age group deviated slightly from 50 and 10, respectively. Although the age-group effects were statistically significant for all tests, the magnitudes of these effects (as indicated by η^2) were large for Block Design and Symbol Digit (i.e., > 27%), moderate for Synonyms (i.e., 7.7%), and small for Digits Forward, Digits

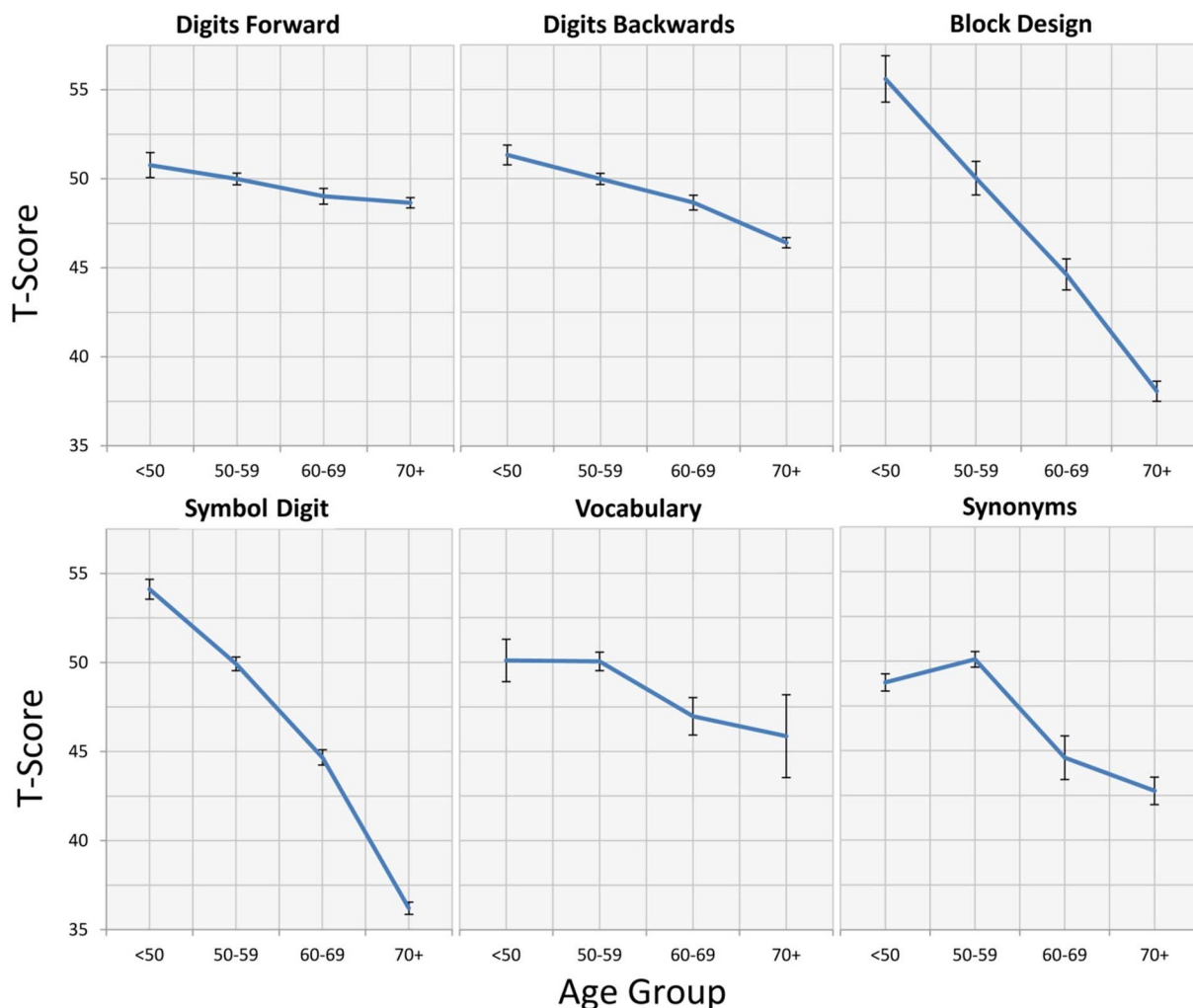


Fig. 3. Mean cognitive test score as a function of age group in the pooled sample. Cognitive scores were scaled to a T-score metric such that mean was 50.0 and standard deviation was 10.0 in the 50–59 age group. Error bars give 95% confidence intervals for the means.

Backward, and Vocabulary (i.e., < 5%). The pattern of age differences was consistent with what has been observed in previous cross-sectional research. That is, Symbol Digit and Block Design showed larger age differences than the verbal tasks (Hoyer, Stawski, Wasylshyn, & Verhaeghen, 2004) and within the Digit Span tasks, the age effect was greater for Digits Backward than Digits Forward (Bopp & Verhaeghen, 2005).

3.2. Twin correlations

Table 3 gives the estimated twin correlations by age group pooled across studies. For completeness, all correlations are reported even though the sample sizes in several cells were quite small (i.e., < 25). Also given in the table are the model fit statistics for testing whether the twin correlations varied significantly across studies. Several general trends were noteworthy. First, there was little evidence for between-study heterogeneity in the twin correlations except for Synonyms, where pooling the correlations resulted in significant increase in the χ^2 test statistic (at $p = 0.001$). Although the significant between-study heterogeneity in the twin correlations for Synonyms suggests caution when interpreting results for this scale, for completeness we report modeling results for this phenotype along with the others. Second, decreasing MZ twin correlations with age were observed for several of the cognitive tests (most notably Digits Forward, Digits Backward, and Block Design), suggesting that genetic influences might decline with

age for these tests. Alternatively, stable MZ but declining DZ correlations were observed for Vocabulary and Synonyms, suggesting that genetic influences on these tests might increase with age. The purpose of the age-moderation analysis was to formalize these impressions while making maximal use of the available age information.

3.3. Age-moderated biometric analysis

Before fitting the age-moderated biometric models, we determined which model, ACE or ADE, provided a better fit for each cognitive test by fitting the alternative three-parameter models to the pooled data. The ACE model had lower AICs for all cognitive tests except Symbol Digit, for which the ADE model was better-fitting (details in the Supplementary material). Table 4 gives fit statistics for the age-moderation models based on the best-fitting ACE or ADE model. For each cognitive test we began with a no-age-moderation model and then tested to see whether adding various age-moderation terms improved model fit. The best-fitting model by AIC is highlighted for each test. Several general trends were notable. First, for all cognitive tests except Vocabulary, some form of age-moderation fit better than the no-age-moderation model. That is, when comparing the no-age-moderation model (#1) to the full age-moderation model that included both linear and quadratic age-moderation on the three biometric parameters (#7), the χ^2 test was statistically significant (at $p < .01$) and the AIC for the no-age-moderation model was larger than for the full age-moderation

Table 3
Twin correlations by age-group pooled across studies.

| Cognitive test | Age group | Twin correlation (95% CI) | | |
|--|-----------|---------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| | | MZ | DZ-ss | DZ-os |
| Digits forward ($\chi^2 = 15.2$ on 10df, $p = .13$) | < 50 | .36 (.20–.51) | .21 (.03–.38) | .32 (.13–.47) |
| | | 124 | 116 | 102 |
| | 50–59 | .48 (.42–.54) | .30 (.23–.37) | .25 (.15–.35) |
| | | 695 | 622 | 2913 |
| | 60–69 | .43 (.33–.52) | .25 (.13–.36) | .14 (.00–.27) |
| | 285 | 287 | 214 | |
| | ≥ 70 | .31 (.23–.38) | .25 (.18–.32) | NA |
| | | 447 | 593 | |
| Digits backward ($\chi^2 = 37.1$ on 21df, $p = .02$) | < 50 | .41 (.29–.52) | .03 (–0.12–0.18) | .33 (.18–.46) |
| | | 194 | 179 | 145 |
| | 50–59 | .41 (.35–.47) | .25 (.17–.32) | .19 (.09–.29) |
| | | 745 | 664 | 327 |
| | 60–69 | .41 (.31–.49) | .16 (.05–.26) | .35 (.23.46) |
| | 323 | 322 | 237 | |
| | ≥ 70 | .29 (.21–.37) | .21 (.14–.28) | .27 (.73–.40) |
| | | 466 | 608 | 18 |
| Block design ($\chi^2 = 6.5$ on 6df, $p = .37$) | < 50 | .71 (.56–.81) | .59 (.33–.77) | NA |
| | | 60 | 34 | |
| | 50–59 | .74 (.63–.82) | .44 (.28–.57) | NA |
| | | 85 | 113 | |
| | 60–69 | .64 (.52–.73) | .32 (.16–.47) | NA |
| | 124 | 123 | | |
| | ≥ 70 | .54 (.41–.65) | .28 (.11–.42) | .22 (.09–.35) |
| | | 124 | 133 | 203 |
| Symbol digit ($\chi^2 = 21.5$ on 16df, $p = .16$) | < 50 | .60 (.50–.68) | .15 (–.01–.30) | .24 (.04–.41) |
| | | 190 | 157 | 97 |
| | 50–59 | .51 (.44–.58) | .25 (.15–.34) | .27 (.16–.37) |
| | | 360 | 374 | 281 |
| | 60–69 | .58 (.51–.64) | .35 (.25–.44) | .33 (.20–.45) |
| | 371 | 333 | 197 | |
| | ≥ 70 | .56 (.48–.62) | .32 (.23–.40) | .34 (.18–.48) |
| | | 335 | 404 | 135 |
| Vocabulary ($\chi^2 = 7.9$ on 2df, $p = .02$) | < 50 | .73 (.61–.82) | .74 (.57–.84) | NA |
| | | 73 | 44 | |
| | 50–59 | .63 (.56–.69) | .40 (.30–.49) | NA |
| | | 372 | 289 | |
| | 60–69 | .78 (.69–.84) | .51 (.29–.67) | NA |
| | 98 | 65 | | |
| | ≥ 70 | .72 (.30–.90) | –.01 (–.54–.52) | NA |
| | | 13 | 14 | |
| Synonyms ($\chi^2 = 21.7$ on 6df, $p = .001$) | < 50 | .68 (.62–.74) | .51 (.43–.58) | NA |
| | | 318 | 383 | |
| | 50–59 | .56 (.49–.62) | .29 (.20–.37) | NA |
| | | 463 | 439 | |
| | 60–69 | .76 (.61–.85) | .30 (.10–.48) | NA |
| | 48 | 84 | | |
| | ≥ 70 | .73 (.60–.81) | .24 (.06–.41) | .43 (.31–.54) |
| | | 83 | 105 | 201 |

NA = Correlation not available; MZ = Monozygotic, DZ-ss = Dizygotic-same sex, DZ-os = Dizygotic-opposite sex. Parenthetical model fit statistics test the fit of pooling twin correlations across the multiple studies.

model. Second, only for Symbol Digit was there evidence for quadratic age moderation. That is, the full age-moderation model did not fit better than the linear age-moderation model. Third, except for Vocabulary, a model with age-moderation on the phenotypic variance only (#2) never fit better by AIC than a model with age-moderation on a biometric component. Fourth, for all five cognitive tests for which there was evidence of age moderation, some form of moderation on the genetic component was required and included in the best-fitting model. Because moderation results can be sensitive to extreme scores on the

moderator, we repeated all age-moderation analyses with participants' ages winsorized to 45 and 85 for ages falling below or above these boundaries, respectively. There were very few differences between the models with ages winsorized or preserved. The patterns observed for the variance components had the same trajectories in the two, and the indicated best-fitting models did not differ. Full sample results are reported here.

To determine if the different forms of assessment influenced the results, we replicated the moderation models restricting our analyses to

Table 4
Fit statistics for age-moderation models.

| Cognitive Test | -2lnl | Model Fit | | | Improvement in Fit Relative to No-Age-Moderation Model | | |
|---|---------|-----------|----|---------|--|-------------|-------|
| | | df | K | AIC | χ^2 | Δdf | p |
| Digits Forward | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 74071.0 | 10084 | 13 | 74097.0 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 74054.5 | 10083 | 14 | 74082.5 | 16.5 | 1 | <.001 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 74050.1 | 10083 | 14 | 74078.1 | 20.9 | 1 | <.001 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on C | 74054.3 | 10083 | 14 | 74082.3 | 16.7 | 1 | <.001 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 74060.5 | 10083 | 14 | 74088.5 | 10.5 | 1 | <.001 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ACE | 74050.1 | 10081 | 16 | 74082.1 | 20.9 | 3 | <.001 |
| 7. Full ACE Moderation | 74047.9 | 10078 | 19 | 74085.9 | 23.1 | 6 | <.001 |
| Digits Backward | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 83171.5 | 11297 | 15 | 83201.5 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 83159.8 | 11296 | 16 | 83191.8 | 11.7 | 1 | <.001 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 83155.9 | 11296 | 16 | 83187.9 | 15.6 | 1 | <.001 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on C | 83158.3 | 11296 | 16 | 83190.3 | 13.2 | 1 | <.001 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 83163.6 | 11296 | 16 | 83195.6 | 7.9 | 1 | 0.004 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ACE | 83155.9 | 11294 | 18 | 83191.9 | 15.6 | 3 | <.001 |
| 7. Full ACE Moderation | 83153.5 | 11291 | 21 | 83195.5 | 18.0 | 6 | 0.006 |
| Block Design | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 17113.9 | 2306 | 10 | 17133.9 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 17113.2 | 2305 | 11 | 17135.2 | 0.6 | 1 | 0.44 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 17106.0 | 2305 | 11 | 17128.0 | 7.8 | 1 | 0.005 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on C | 17099.7 | 2305 | 11 | 17121.7 | 14.2 | 1 | <.001 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 17109.8 | 2305 | 11 | 17131.8 | 4.0 | 1 | 0.05 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ACE | 17087.4 | 2303 | 13 | 17113.4 | 26.4 | 3 | <.001 |
| 7. Full ACE Moderation | 17087.0 | 2300 | 16 | 17119.0 | 26.8 | 6 | <.001 |
| Symbol Digit | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 64409.3 | 8711 | 14 | 64437.3 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 64409.0 | 8710 | 15 | 64439.0 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.58 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 64408.1 | 8710 | 15 | 64438.1 | 1.17 | 1 | 0.23 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on D | 64405.7 | 8710 | 15 | 64435.7 | 3.61 | 1 | 0.06 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 64409.2 | 8710 | 15 | 64439.2 | 0.04 | 1 | 0.84 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ADE | 64404.3 | 8708 | 17 | 64438.3 | 5.0 | 3 | 0.17 |
| 7. Full ADE Moderation | 64381.8 | 8705 | 20 | 64421.8 | 27.4 | 6 | <.001 |
| 8. Linear and Quadratic Moderation only on A | 64404.7 | 8709 | 16 | 64436.7 | 4.5 | 2 | 0.03 |
| 9. Linear and Quadratic Moderation only on D | 64386.5 | 8709 | 16 | 64418.5 | 22.8 | 2 | <.001 |
| 10. Linear and Quadratic Moderation only on E | 64409.2 | 8709 | 16 | 64441.2 | 0.1 | 2 | 0.98 |
| Vocabulary | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 14613.2 | 2023 | 7 | 14627.2 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 14613.1 | 2022 | 8 | 14629.1 | 0.1 | 1 | 0.78 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 14613.1 | 2022 | 8 | 14629.1 | 0.1 | 1 | 0.73 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on C | 14613.1 | 2022 | 8 | 14629.1 | 0.1 | 1 | 0.75 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 14613.1 | 2022 | 8 | 14629.1 | 0.1 | 1 | 0.73 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ACE | 14610.5 | 2020 | 10 | 14630.5 | 2.7 | 3 | 0.44 |
| 7. Full ACE Moderation | 14604.0 | 2017 | 13 | 14630.0 | 9.2 | 6 | 0.16 |
| Synonyms | | | | | | | |
| 1.No Age Moderation | 33136.5 | 4503 | 12 | 33160.5 | | | |
| 2. Scalar model | 33021.2 | 4502 | 13 | 33047.2 | 115.3 | 1 | <.001 |
| 3. Linear Moderation only on A | 33030.5 | 4502 | 13 | 33056.5 | 106.0 | 1 | <.001 |
| 4. Linear Moderation only on C | 33065.6 | 4502 | 13 | 33091.6 | 70.9 | 1 | <.001 |
| 5. Linear Moderation only on E | 33030.6 | 4502 | 13 | 33056.6 | 105.9 | 1 | <.001 |
| 6. Linear Moderation on ACE | 33004.4 | 4500 | 15 | 33034.4 | 132.1 | 3 | <.001 |
| 7. Full ACE Moderation | 32999.4 | 4497 | 18 | 33035.4 | 137.1 | 6 | <.001 |

k is the number of estimated parameters, including means.

AIC is equal to $-2lnl + 2*k$.

df = degrees of freedom.

A = additive genetic, C = shared environmental, E = non-shared environmental, D = dominance. ACE models fit for all tests except Symbol Digit for which preliminary data suggested non-additivity so an ADE model was fit.

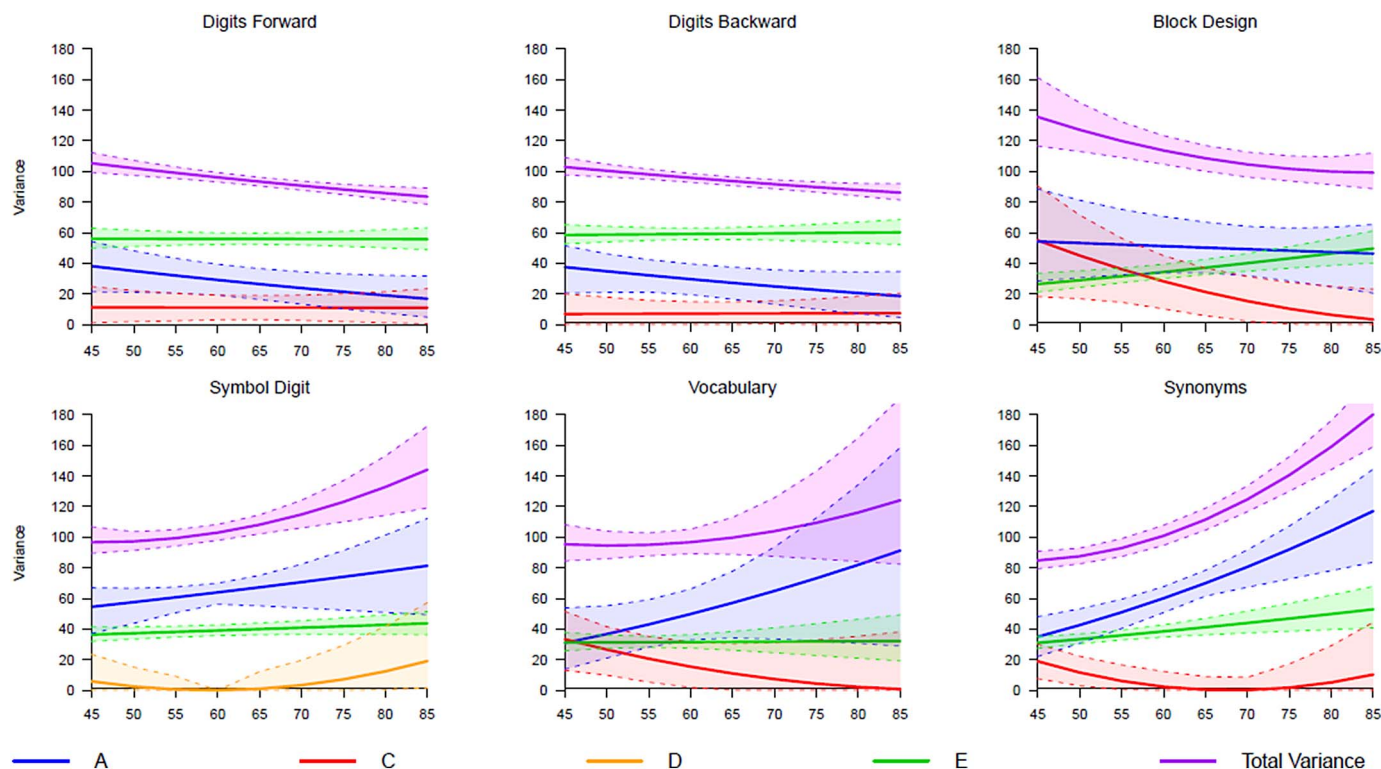


Fig. 4. Raw variance component estimates and total phenotypic variance with 95% confidence intervals from the age-moderation model. A = additive genetic component of variance, C = shared environmental variance component, D = dominance variance component and E = non-shared environmental variance component.

only those studies that had used the exact same test. There were only two tests, Digits Forward and Backward, where this was possible. Overall, the pattern of results for these two tests did not differ markedly when using all available data versus only using data based on the same test. Finally, to assess the power of the age moderation tests, we first derived the median observed non-centrality parameter for each age-moderation model across cognitive tests. For each cognitive test, we then derived the observed power for rejecting the null hypothesis with the effect size set at this median value. Based on this analysis, the observed power was at least 88% for the best-fitting models and ranged from 71% to 100% for the full age-moderation model (i.e., Model #7; details provided in Supplementary material, Table S9).

Graphical displays of the age-moderation results are provided for the raw variance components and phenotypic variances with 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 4 and the standardized estimates with 95% confidence intervals in Fig. 5. To facilitate comparisons across tests, estimates are reported for the linear moderation on ACE model (#6), except for Symbol Digit where quadratic age moderation for the ADE model (#7) is reported. Several patterns were evident. First, phenotypic variance increased for the two verbal tests, decreased for the two Digit Span tests and Block Design, and was generally stable for Symbol Digit. Second, Digits Forward and Digits Backward show a near identical pattern of declining genetic variances but stable shared environmental and non-shared environmental variances. As a consequence, the heritability of the two span measures declined from about 35% at age 45 to 20% at age 80. Third, the two verbal tests, Vocabulary and Synonyms, showed similar patterns of increasing genetic variances and declining shared environmental variances across age even though the no-age-moderation model fit best for Vocabulary and the linear moderation on ACE model fit best for Synonyms. The non-shared environmental component was, however, stable with age for Vocabulary but increasing for Synonyms. Heritability estimates for these two tests increased from 30 to 40% at age 45 to 65–75% at age 85. Third, although heritability of Block Design was relatively stable across age (at approximately 45%), on the raw scale this test showed declining genetic and shared environmental variance and increasing non-shared environmental

variance with age. Finally, Symbol Digit, the only test for which modeling analyses supported quadratic age-moderation effects and where the ADE model fit better than the ACE model, showed an increase in additive genetic variance and a decrease in dominance genetic variance up to about age 60 followed by relative stability in these components through age 80. The total genetic variance being the sum of additive and dominance effects, however, was stable across the full age range for Symbol Digit.

4. Discussion

Cross-sectional analyses of six specific measures of cognitive function in a combined sample of 14,534 twins aged 26 to 98 years revealed age differences in the magnitudes of genetic and environmental contributions to phenotypic variance that varied across test. Before discussing these findings, we acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, pooling cognitive measures across nine twin samples may obscure important between-study differences. Nonetheless, there was limited statistical evidence of between-study heterogeneity in twin similarity, apart from the verbal domain, suggesting that it may not be an important contributor to our results. Second, the twin samples came from three relatively affluent countries, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Lastly, the six tests we investigated were not all administered in the nine studies nor do they capture the full range of cognitive abilities implicated in aging. Consequently, we could not harmonize a valid measure of GCA¹; however, our results are still

¹ Please note, an attempt to harmonize a GCA was conducted for a subset of the studies using only the Swedish and Danish studies as these studies had the most comprehensive cognitive test coverage and same test administration. The GCA factor created from all available cognitive tests for these studies could not be harmonized as the within study heterogeneity was too high. Additionally, a GCA factor was created using the same test coverage (Digit Span and Symbol Digit tests) between these same studies and no age moderation evidence was found based on model test fit. It is unknown if this is a true pattern for GCA or an artifact due to limited cognitive test coverage since this GCA factor could not be validated within this study.

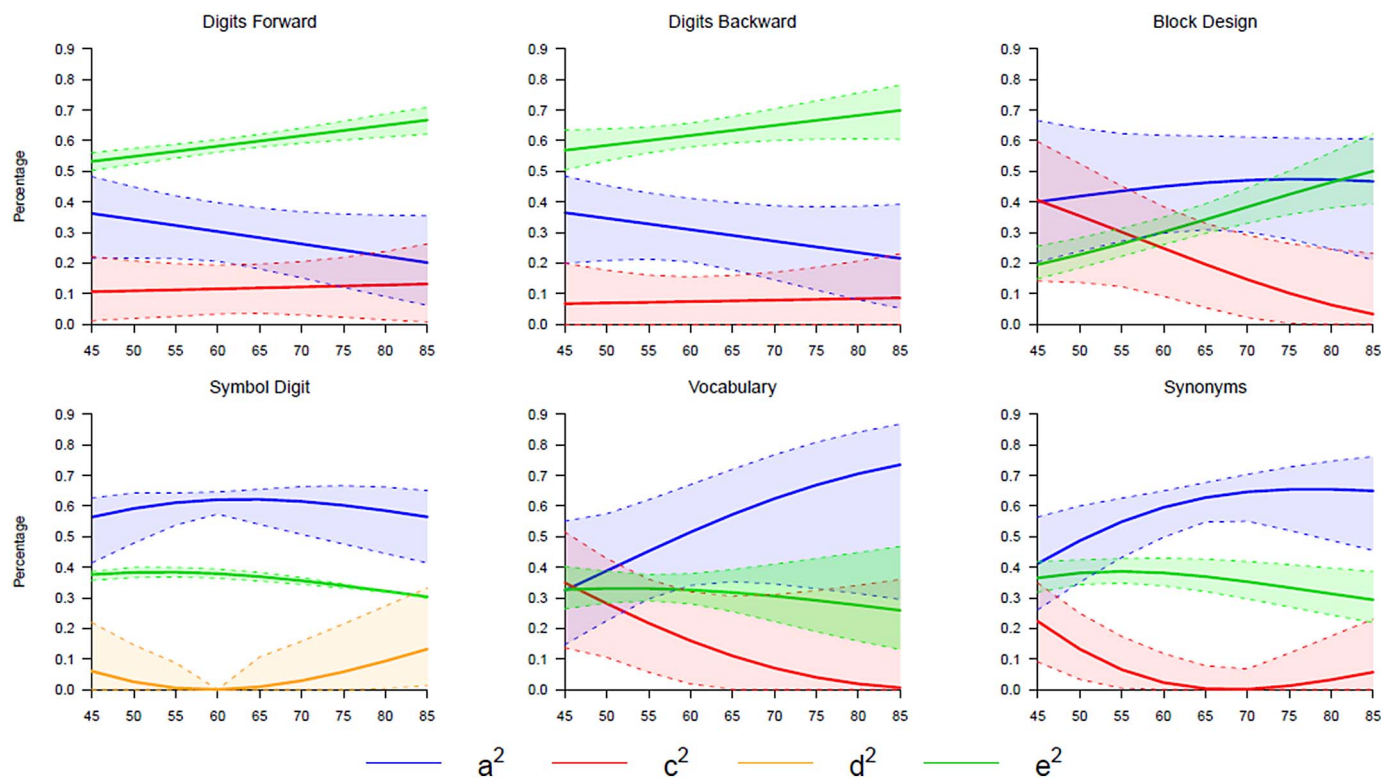


Fig. 5. Standardized variance component estimates with 95% confidence intervals from the age-moderation model; a^2 = proportion of phenotypic variance attributed to additive genetic factors, c^2 = proportion of phenotypic variance attributed to shared environmental factors, d^2 = proportion of phenotypic variance attributed to dominance factors, and e^2 = proportion of phenotypic variance attributed to non-shared environmental factors.

informative about GCA. As a single measure, GCA can, of course, have only one best-fitting model with respect to age moderation from mid- to late life. Therefore, our results indicate that examination of age-moderation effects on genetic and environmental variance in GCA must obscure differing directional change for the various specific cognitive abilities that underlie GCA. GCA typically represents a composite of multiple specific cognitive measures. Our results suggest that these specific measures show different patterns of age moderation of the underlying biometric components of variance.

Despite the above mentioned limitations, our findings provide a comprehensive and informative picture of how genetic influences on cognitive abilities vary across adulthood. Overall, the heritability estimates we report as seen in Table 3 are consistent with past research on specific cognitive abilities (i.e., 23–62%, Reynolds & Finkel, 2015). Research with younger samples has consistently found that the heritability of GCA increases through early adulthood (Bergen et al., 2007; Haworth et al., 2010), but it is not known whether the same is true for specific cognitive abilities. We sought to address if there is any difference in heritability of cognitive abilities across age in late life. There are a limited number of twin studies of cognitive function in mid- to late-adulthood, and the studies that do exist have reported increasing, decreasing, as well as stable patterns of heritability with age (Finkel & Reynolds, 2010). This heterogeneity may be the result of different cognitive abilities having different patterns of heritability with age, a possibility that is supported by our findings. Importantly, a pattern of changing heritability could arise because the underlying biometric components are not all changing at the same rate. For example, increasing heritability can be the result of an increasing genetic component but stable environmental components, or alternatively, decreasing environmental components but a stable genetic component. To resolve these possibilities, it is important to investigate age differences in the underlying biometric components, as we did in this study.

The two verbal tasks, Vocabulary and Synonyms, showed age patterning consistent with what has been observed at earlier

developmental stages: greater A (additive genetic variance) at higher ages combined with less C (shared environmental variance). Although we interpret this common pattern here, it is important to recognize that we did not find statistical evidence for significant age moderation for Vocabulary. At younger developmental stages, this pattern of increasing A with decreasing C has been hypothesized to be due to a shift from passive gene-shared environment to active gene-non-shared environment correlational processes (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). That is, as individuals achieve greater independence in early adulthood, they increasingly seek out environments and experiences that are consistent with and reinforce their underlying genetic dispositions. This active matching of environment to genotype would result in amplification of genetic variance and consequent increases in genetic variance (Briley & Tucker-Drob, 2013). By extension, many estimates of genetic influences in cross-sectional studies reported to date are biased. The results reported here are consistent with active genotype-environment correlational processes continuing to be important throughout mid- and late-life for verbal-related abilities. The finding that intellectual engagement in midlife was significantly heritable (McGue, Skytthe, & Christensen, 2014) suggests that intellectual engagement might be a useful target in future investigations of the role of active gene-environment correlational processes in late-life cognitive functioning. Why this process would apply to only two of the six cognitive tests we investigated is, however, unclear. One possibility is that word knowledge may be amenable to active gene-environment correlation because it is amenable to routine practice (e.g., through reading books), while the other cognitive tasks we assessed are typically not required in everyday life. Regardless, resolving the basis for greater genetic variance with age observed with the verbal tests will ultimately require analysis of longitudinal data.

Although the age moderation models for vocabulary seem to provide an interesting pattern of genetic and environmental contributions, we want to be cautious in interpreting this result to discuss why this was the only one of six measures in which age moderation was non-

significant. Low power may have contributed to our failure to find evidence for age moderation. Vocabulary had the smallest sample, $N = 968$, of all cognitive tests examined. We did find significant age moderation effects for Block Design, which had only a slightly larger sample size ($N = 996$), but there were only 27 people in the > 70 age group for Vocabulary compared with 257 for Block Design. Notably, 68% of the sample for Vocabulary fell in the 50–59 age range, suggesting that the combination of relatively small sample size and low age variability limited the power for Vocabulary. Consistent with this interpretation, among all tests the observed statistical power under the full ACE moderation model (#7) was lowest for Vocabulary (71%, Supplementary Table S9).

A common interpretation of the lifespan developmental perspective leads to the expectation that the E (non-shared environmental variance) contribution to cognitive function will increase with age (Baltes et al., 1980). We found evidence for notable age increases in E for only two cognitive tests: Block Design and Synonyms. This increase in E is further strengthened when A is either stable or decreasing, a pattern observed for Block Design. Since E is confounded with measurement error, however, an increase in E could be due to declining reliability rather than increasing importance of unique experiential factors. We indirectly evaluated the possibility of differential reliability by assessing the inter-test correlations in all of the four age groups for five test pairings (Table S1 in the Supplemental materials). The resulting average phenotypic correlations ranged from .34 in the < 50 group to .42 in the 70 and older group, suggesting little differential attenuation caused by measurement error. This observation was also supported by the stable split-half correlations reported by the WAIS-R for Block Design in age groups covering 16 to 74 (Weschler, 1981). Our results thus suggested that Block Design and Synonyms might be usefully targeted to identify the unique experiential factors that contribute to individual differences in late-life cognitive functioning. Alternatively, greater E with age may signal greater differences in genetic sensitivity to environmental exposures (Reynolds et al., 2013), as in standard biometric models of reared-together twin data gene by non-shared environmental interaction effects are included in the estimate of E.

Although we observed greater E with age for Block Design and Synonyms, A for these tests was either slightly lower (Block Design) or notably greater with age (Synonyms). When these patterns were extended to the standardized model (as seen in Fig. 5), heritability was observed to be stable and greater with age for Block Design and Synonyms, respectively. We only observed smaller heritability with age for the two Digit Span tasks, and in both cases this owed to smaller A rather than to greater E. This pattern was unexpected but does mirror a similar pattern found for GCA after age 60 by Finkel and Reynolds (2010). The decrease in the genetic component of variance for the span measures could arise if task performance strategies change with age, possibly due to perceptions about memory function. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether the decline in genetic influence for the span measures is due to different genetic factors influencing span performance at different ages or the same genetic factors having different magnitudes of effect at different ages.

The genetic contributions to Block Design and Symbol Digit were relatively stable with age, which is in contrast to the lower heritability of Digit Span measures, or the greater heritability of the verbal measures with age. For Symbol Digit, the only test for which the ADE model fit best, E was stable with age, but A increased through age 70 while the dominance variance component (D) declined after age 60. As a consequence, the total genetic contribution (i.e., additive plus dominance) on both the raw and standardized scale was largely stable for this test. For Block Design the heritability increased slightly with age, despite slightly less A with age but substantially greater E. This seemingly anomalous pattern was the consequence of sharply less C with age for Block Design. Less C with age was observed with all three tests, Block Design, Vocabulary, and Synonyms, for which there was evidence of moderate shared environmental influences at the youngest ages in our

sample. This pattern is consistent with the general finding in behavioral genetics that the shared environment becomes diminishingly important the further one is temporally removed from the rearing home (Lichtenstein, Pedersen, & McClearn, 1992).

In summary, we found evidence of age moderation of the biometric components of variance that differed across cognitive tasks. Considering proportions of variance, we observed increasing heritability for Vocabulary and Synonyms, decreasing heritability for Digits Forward and Digits Backward, and stable heritability for Block Design and Symbol Digit. We found support for the prediction from lifespan developmental theory that unique experiences become increasingly important with age for Block Design and Synonyms. Alternatively, for the two verbal tasks, Vocabulary and Synonyms, we found evidence consistent with the increasing importance of active gene-environment correlational processes with age.

This study provides a preliminary step on moving closer to filling the gaps within the behavior genetic literature on cognitive abilities trajectories in late life but more work is still needed. In the future, we plan to extend our analyses to longitudinal data to explore intra-individual variability across age and time, an opportunity available because most of the IGEMS studies are longitudinal. Relatedly, potential birth cohort effects not examined here will be explored in subsequent work. In addition, to better understand the mechanisms influencing the differential developmental pathways for specific cognitive measures, possible gene-environment interactions should be explored. In conclusion, this study aids in trying to bring convergence on a topic within the literature often plagued by discrepant findings. This study also highlights the importance of investigating specific cognitive traits across age since genetic and environmental influences varied by measure. Lastly, this study shows that large scale harmonization projects are possible and can provide nuanced and informative findings potentially obscured by standard meta-analytic approaches or unavailable to smaller individual studies.

Author contributions

All authors helped to conceptualize the project and design the data analysis through conference calls. All authors read, commented, edited multiple drafts of the paper, and approved the final version. SP, NRH and MM took primary responsibility for undertaking the analyses; SP and MM took primary responsibility for writing the initial draft of the paper. Data were contributed by IP & KC (MADT and LSADT); CEF and WSK (VETSA); RFK (MIDUS); JMN (TOSS); NLP, ADA, CAR, DF, and MG (SATSA, OCTO-Twin and Gender); and MM (MTSADA).

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2017.12.004>.

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