Emotion regulation between determinants and consequences

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Abstract

Emotion regulation, a concept that sparked great interest from researchers in the last two decades, is deepening the understanding of the affective dimension of mental functioning. If there was a time when emotions were taboo for research and psychological intervention, today it has become a significant component that is integral with the cognitions and behaviors and this allows a holistic approach to the human being. Furthermore, research in this area "dug" so much, that at this point there are known strategies that we use even in the emotion generative process. The recent literature, dedicated to emotional regulation, argues that people try, by an automatic way, to control their emotional experiences (Gross, 2002). Automatism, more or less functional, is the result of the interaction of heredity, environment and education. Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are the previous focused strategies and response-focused strategies of the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2002). The progresses made in knowledge of emotion regulation are the results of experimental studies and studies of individual differences in which emotion regulation has been reported to a number of constructs. Results, coherent and consistent for some variables (eg age is associated with decreased expressive suppression, men use more expressive suppression than women) are contradictory to others (eg, neuroticism, as a dimension of personality, is predictor variable and without significant correlations with expressive suppression, over 25 years increased use of cognitive reappraisal or age does not influence the use of cognitive reappraisal). In our analysis, we organize and summarize the results of investigations in terms of two main categories of factors that, according to the analysis grid, are subsumed to the heredity-environment interaction (as factors of personality development): 1. determinants and 2. consequences. For an accurate analysis, each of the two categories is divided into subcategories and analyzed in terms of the established models: 1.1. intrinsic factors: temperament and personality structure (Five Factor Model of Personality, Tupes & Cristal, 1961) and 2.1. extrinsic factors: attachment style (Attachment Theory, Ainsworth, 1969; Bartholomew and Horowitz Model, 1991; Armanden Model, 1986), emotion socialization (Malatesta- Magai Model, 1991), 2.2. demographic factors (gender and age), 2.3. cultural factors (culture of belonging). In terms of consequences, the analysis focuses on three areas: emotional, cognitive and social. The third factor of personality development - the influence of socio-educational, brings to attention the empirical arguments from clinical psychology and psychotherapy, to support the intervention oriented toward restoring the functional mechanisms of cognitive reappraisal of emotion regulation.

Keywords: emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, personality, attachment, emotion socialization, emotional, cognitive and social consequences.
1. Paper rationale

In the last two decades, psychological research has increasingly focused on emotional regulation (ER) (Bosse et al., 2010). The relevance of emotional research is particularly visible in clinical psychology where health promotion, optimization and functional development are the main objectives. In this context, sanogenic factors, which are a measure of well being, are selected according to the emotional criterion - sanogenic factors are those which generate functional positive and negative emotions (David, 2006).

2. Theoretical foundations

Emotion regulation is a concept that elicited particular interest in research in the last five years, with direct and immediate effects on publications in this field. This construct and the interest which it raised in the last twenty years has created a new field of research originating from developmental literature.

Current knowledge in the field is based on research findings that have used the Gross’ process model of emotion regulation (1998a, 1998b, Gross & John, 2002, 2003) which represents the starting point of our work. Within this model, ER represents the totality of conscious and unconscious strategies we use in order to increase, maintain or decrease one or more components of emotional response (Gross, 2007).

In keeping with the process model of emotion regulation, emotion begins with an assessment of internal and external emotional clues. Certain evaluations determine response tendencies that can be modulated and this modulation, which gives the final shape of the manifest emotional response, can be achieved by: situation selection, situation modification, attention movement, cognitive change and response modulation. These five processes can be integrated into supra-ordinate categories: the first four are considered as antecedent-focused strategies because they occur before the emotional response tendency and are in opposition to the last process that is focused on response and occurs after the response was generated (Gross & Munoz, 1995).

Of the many strategies employed in ER management, the authors of the model decided to focus on a smaller number of well-defined strategies. As regards selection, they considered three criteria: a). strategies should be commonly used in everyday life, b). strategies should lend themselves to both experimental manipulations and analyses on individual differences c). due to the distinction between antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies, the authors tried include one example of each of them. Thus, two strategies emerged that met all these criteria: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (John & Gross, 2004).

Cognitive reappraisal is a cognitive-change strategy that involves redefining a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in a way that changes its emotional impact. It is a way of cognitive change that falls under the antecedent-focused strategies and consists in selecting a more or less emotional means of interpreting the situation.

Expressive suppression is a form of response that involves inhibition of emotional expressive behaviour in progress. It means a response modulation already triggered and therefore forms part of the category of strategies focused on response (Gullone et al., 2010). Suppression might be understood as a chronic and conscious discrepancy between what an individual feels and expresses (Christophe, 2009). A result of using this strategy in day-to-day life is a profound sense of mismatch between self and external behaviour. Considering the resultant lack of authenticity (I display something different than what I feel), the person tries to avoid social disapproval and rejection (John & Gross, 2004).

3. Contribution on the existing theory and practice

Relevant variables that interact with emotion regulation strategies act both as determinant and determinate factors. ER (adaptive or non-adaptive) strategies are determined by intrinsic / predisposing factors (temperament, personality), extrinsic factors (interaction with the family in which the attachment relationship and emotion socialization strategies develop), as well as by demographic factors such as age and gender (Gresham & Gullone,
Regarding our personal contribution in the field of theorizing, we mention the idea of putting together determinants and consequences of the emotional regulation, in a context of analysis developed and fostered by relevant studies. Although the emotional regulation is the key concept of our work, the educational reality includes it both explicitly or by default, and that is why it can’t and should not be separated by the affective dimension.

ER difficulties are associated with: depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, social dysfunction, high level of negative affects and low level of positive affects (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Berking et al., 2008; Saxena et al., 2011; Livingstone et al., 2009; Dennis, 2007). ER strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) are predictive factors for emotional, social and physical difficulties (Schutte et al., 2009; John & Gross, 2004).

Bidirectional approach of emotional regulation, based on determinants and affective consequences via reviewing the relevant research data, will shape a coherent image of this concept.

Personality traits, developed from early temperamental dispositions, were associated with ER strategies. Reactivity, hypersensitivity and cyclothymic dispositions (as dimensions of temperament) are positively and significantly correlated with the two ER strategies (Morris et al., 2007; Khodarahimi et al., 2011). Studies on personality factors (determinant and intrinsic factors), from the Big Five taxonomy viewpoint, show both consistent and contradictory aspects concerning the two ER strategies. A series of studies congruently suggests that extraversion and agreeability – two of the five dimensions of personality – predict or have significant correlations with expressive suppression (John & Gross, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2010; Gresham & Gullone, 2012). However, as regards neuroticism, research data are contradictory, suggesting both that ‘there are no significant correlations between neuroticism and suppression’ (John & Gross, 2004), and the opposite, i.e. ‘neuroticism is a predictive factor for expressive suppression’ (this relationship has never been reported before the study conducted by Gresham & Gullone, 2012). The type of uncertain relationship is completely different between neuroticism and cognitive reappraisal: neuroticism (along with agreeability and conscientiousness) does not predict CR or is negatively correlated with CR (John & Gross, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2010; Gresham & Gullone, 2012).

While intrinsic factors such as temperament and personality structure have significant implications on ER strategies, some authors consider that the way how individuals manage their emotions is not predominantly determined by predisposing factors, but by interaction with the family (Gresham & Gullone, 2012).

Therefore, attachment (Attachment Theory, Ainsworth, 1969; Bartholomew and Horowitz Model, 1991; Armsden Model, 2009), as a determinant and extrinsic factor, developed through dyadic relations and perception of affects and affective availability of the adult, (Izard et al., 2011), is to define the affective and behavioural expression, as well as the successful use of ER strategy of the child (Izard et al., 2008; Izard et al, 2011). Gilliom found that secure attachment at 1 year and a half of age predicts ER at the age of three, and research on teenagers showed that teenagers with high level of ER qualified the attachment relationship with their parents as more secure (Morris et al., 2007). Research data constantly indicate powerful correlations and predictive links between attachment and ER (Izard et al., 2008; Izard et. al, 2011; Jaffe, 2010; Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Morris et al., 2007; Armsden, 2009).

In developing ER, parental practices play a particular role in intensifying and diminishing adaptive or maladaptive temperamental tendencies (Jaffe M, 2010). The parental style of emotion socialising, as a determinate and extrinsic factor, put into operation - according to the Malatesta-Magai Model (1991) - in positive- (reward, distraction) and negative-type (punishment, neglect, amplification) strategies, has a significant and constant impact on affective development in general, and particularly on ER mechanisms. These data represent a constant of various research studies (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010; Silk et al., 2011; Klimes-Dougan, 2007; Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002).

Regarding (determinant and extrinsic) demographic factors, gender represents an invoked variable which is constantly linked with ER strategies: men use suppression to a higher degree than women and there are no gender differences concerning the use of cognitive reappraisal (John & Gross, 2003; Haga, 2009). However, age shows
constant values as regards expressive suppression only: under the age of 25 emotional suppression (ES) is activated more frequently and, as people grow older, this ER strategy becomes less frequent (John & Gross, 2004; Gullone, 2010; Haga, 2009). Regarding CR, as related to age, research data were contradictory as to whether CR is more frequently activated over 25 years of age, or whether CR increases with age or not (Hay, 2011; Haga, 2009; John & Gross, 2004; Gullone, 2010).

Cultural background is another factor based on which ER strategy use may be explained. Americans are more likely to activate suppression and display high scores in depressive disposition and negative affects, as compared to Norwegians and Australians (Haga, 2009).

Affective consequences of suppression, as measured in a series of experimental studies, as well as in studies on individual differences are as follows: the experience and expression of more numerous dysfunctional negative emotions, the less successful recovery of the mood, the outburst and maintenance of psychic troubles (Gross, 2010; John & Gross, 2004; Gullone, 2010; Dennis, 2007). However, the impact of suppression is variable as related to the type of emotion – suppression decreases the expression of negative emotions, but not their experience as well. These studies, replicated on positive emotions (e.g. amusement) have shown that suppressing negative emotions leaves the negative emotion experience intact, whereas suppressing positive emotions decreases their experience (Gullone, 2010). In case of cognitive reappraisal, this is positively and significantly correlated with good mood, life satisfaction and positive affects (independent extraversion effect), and the attempt at rebalancing negative mood with depressive disposition, negative affects, anxiety (Haga, 2009; Gullone, 2010; Dennis, 2007; John & Gross 2004; Hag; Saxena et al., 2011).

Cognitive consequences are less visible and significant. Expressive suppression is negatively and poorly correlated with memory, while cognitive reappraisal bears no significant links to this cognitive process (John & Gross, 2004). Finally, expressive suppression proves to be maladaptive also for the social dimension of personality. Social sharing of emotions, both positive and negative, defines the quality of interpersonal relations (John & Gross, 2004).

Conclusions

Recent literature dedicated to emotional regulation (ER) claims that people try, in an automatic way, to control their emotional experiences (Gross, 2002). Automatisms, more or less functional, are, as described above, the resultant of the interaction of the hereditary factors with those pertaining to home environment. While hereditary predispositions (personality structure) may interfere negatively with ER strategies (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2010), there is a chain of corrective solutions that come into play at different times of development. A first intervention is that of the family environment which meets the emotional needs of the child. It is here that the first interaction between personality factors and emotional demands takes place. If early emotional experiences built through interaction with the mother and the father are positive, the child will develop a securing attachment style, will understand why he/she experiences certain emotions end especially how to regulate them (cognitive reappraisal) for a proper adaption to the demands coming from the environment. Conversely, if emotional experiences crystallize in an attachment style defined by fear, concern and rejection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) complemented by the unsuccessful emotional lessons of mom and dad who respond in a dysfunctional way to the child’s emotions (through reactions such as denial, punishment, amplification, Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002), the result will be an unhappy interaction between hereditary factors and those pertaining to environment and education, with direct implications on ER mechanisms: more frequent use of expressive suppression, with multiple consequences in terms of affective, cognitive, social development, as well as on well being in general.

References


