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When you don't like what you feel: Experiential avoidance, mindfulness and meta-emotion in emotion regulation

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the role of (1) “experiential avoidance” (being non-accepting towards mental events) and (2) “mindful awareness” (being attentive in the present moment) in the prediction of well-being. These established constructs are newly complemented with (3) “meta-emotions” (emotional reactions about one’s own emotions) that allow for a meaningful differentiation of processes in experiential avoidance. Psychometric properties of the newly developed Meta-Emotion Scale (MES) are presented. Psychological well-being is strongly predicted by all three facets. Of the six MES subscales, substantial predictive power could be confirmed for “contempt/shame”, “suppression”, “tough control” and “interest”, whereas “anger” and “compassionate care”, unexpectedly, exerted little influence in our non-clinical sample. The role of meta-emotions in emotion regulation is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Emotion regulation has been conceived as processes that serve to intensify, dampen, or maintain the behavioural, cognitive, experiential, or physiological aspects of emotion depending on an individual’s goals (Gross & Thompson, 2007). In this field of research, habitual suppression of emotion has been found to be associated with a less favourable balance of negative and positive affect, less life satisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological well-being (Gross & John, 2003).

Research on mindfulness offers a distinct but related perspective on emotion regulation. In this domain, the dimension spanning non-acceptance of mental events to acceptance is investigated. Experiential avoidance (EA; Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson, et al., 2004) is defined as unwillingness to experience feelings, thoughts and sensations as well as attempts to alter them. Accumulating evidence supports its central role in psychopathology (e.g., Zvolensky, Feldner, Leen-Feldner, & Yartz, 2005). Mindfulness as its beneficial counterpart is purposefully and non-judgmentally paying attention in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). “Being non-judging/accepting” and “awareness/attentiveness in the present moment” are central facets of mindfulness that are emphasized in a variety of measures and negatively predict psychological symptoms (e.g., Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003).

The conceptual relationship between mindfulness and EA is much debated. Despite considerable overlap in underlying processes, the most salient differences in the constructs are the divergent theoretical contexts from which they are drawn (Eastern philosophy and functional contextualism, respectively; see Block-Lerner, Salters-Pedneault, and Tull (2005) for a discussion).

EA and mindfulness represent constructs that influence the experience of emotions. The central processes are yet to be nailed down (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). Most studies on mindfulness have focused solely on the effectiveness of interventions, but it is not clear why people avoid thoughts and emotions in the first place.

1.1. “Meta-emotion”: emotion as regulation of emotion

We argue that the investigation of emotional reactions about one’s emotions, i.e., “meta-emotions” (Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1997) coined the term to describe parental emotions on emotional displays of their child), illuminates processes in (non-)acceptance of emotions. Meta-emotions can be conceived as a subclass of “secondary emotions” (Greenberg, 2002) which is a temporal concept (a secondary emotion like anxiety follows a primary emotion like anger in time) but also implies that primary emotions can be the “object” of secondary emotions (i.e., anxiety about the angry self). Thus, emotions like anxiety, anger, or compassion become meta-emotions if their object is the emotional self (the “meta”-aspect indicated henceforth with the prefix ^m).

As emotions, meta-emotions go beyond “meta-cognitions” (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2004) and might produce vicious

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circles and rebound effects (Wegner, 1994). Approaches investigating “meta-mood-experiences” (Mayer & Stevens, 1994; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995), again, explore cognitions about mood (e.g., “clarity”, “attention”, “acceptability”) with the exception that “shame about one’s mood” is part of the “acceptability”-factor in Mayer and Stevens’ (1994) approach.

Several examples in clinical psychology can be conceived as meta-emotional experiences (“affect phobia”, Williams, Chambless, & Ahrens, 1997; “fear of fear”, Reiss, Peterson, Gursky, & McNally, 1986); however, these are concepts confined to a single emotion (fear) within a wide array of possible emotion-about-emotion phenomena.

Meta-emotions elucidate processes in EA/mindfulness in meaningful ways: first, as emotions, they embed a judgment (cognitive appraisal) that is in contrast to the definition of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn (1990). Whereas negative meta-emotions (e.g., ^manger, ^manxiety) reflect EA and non-acceptance, positive meta-emotions (e.g., ^mcompassion, ^minterest) support acceptance of one’s emotions with possible positive effects on well-being (Neff, 2003) but still involve a valenced appraisal.

Second, the quality of meta-emotions provides information on regulatory processes operating on the target emotion. For example, being angry about one’s anxiety will influence the experience of that anxiety, and this process differs from experiencing compassion about being anxious. ^mAnxiety about one’s emotions depicts threat and uncertainty with the accompanying action tendency (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), whereas ^manger involves the perception of blocked goals and the motivation to attack, etc. Perceived control in handling the target emotion is different in ^manxiety compared to ^manger; it is also different in ^mcompassion compared to ^minterest.

We argue that recurrent meta-emotions reflect an important part of a person’s emotion regulation with impact on the individual’s psychological well-being (PWB). PWB is related to but distinct from “subjective well-being” that is more hedonic in character (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; see also “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” well-being; Ryan & Deci, 2001). PWB as “perception of engagement with existential challenges of life” (Keyes et al., 2002) is more readily compatible with a mindfulness/acceptance-frame where (negative) emotions are allowed/accepted. Negative meta-emotions indicate that this “engagement” does not run smoothly.

Apart from ^manxiety, few empirical data on emotion-about-emotion phenomena are available. Whelton and Greenberg (2005) found self-contempt to be associated with depressive symptoms. Leahy (2005) reported that people who expect others to invalidate their feelings stick to a positive view of worrying (not to get hurt). If people expect validation, they should experience less guilt and shame about their emotions.

On the positive side, Neff (2003) has shown positive correlations between “self-compassion”, mindfulness, and well-being. Gilbert and colleagues (2006) have investigated “self-warmth” which is conceived as interpersonal strategy that is projected onto the self.

In this study, we investigated the relative contribution of the above-mentioned factors to well-being: (1) “experiential avoidance” is conceived as an important metacognitive frame for handling mental events in a judging/non-accepting way with negative impact on well-being; (2) we expected a positive contribution of “mindful awareness” as “being attentive in the present moment”; and (3) with the newly developed Meta-Emotion Scale (MES) we included emotion-about-emotion experiences in the model to further illuminate ongoing processes in emotion regulation. We expected factors to emerge that represent discrete emotional reactions about one’s emotions (interest-about-emotions, anger-about-emotions, etc.) and explain additional variance in well-being. Whereas negative meta-emotions should reveal

negative correlations, the opposite was expected for positive meta-emotions.

2. Study 1: development of the Meta-Emotion Scale and predictive power regarding psychological well-being

Factor structure and psychometric properties of the MES were explored in a non-clinical sample.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Sample A: Out of 339 students attending a course on communication skills (spring 2005) at the Medical University Innsbruck, 334 agreed to participate in this study earning no credits for participation (age mean = 22.37, SD = 2.81; Min = 19, Max = 42; 54.1% female; 36.3% single, 11.1% lived alone). After giving informed consent, subjects completed questionnaires during the course.

2.1.2. Measures

Meta-Emotion Scale (MES): A pool of meta-emotion experiences was generated through interviews with three clinical psychologists, four lay people and three patients (“What sort of negative and positive emotional reactions to your own emotions do you know from your own experience/your work with patients?”). Forty items were phrased which are rated from 1 = “is not at all true for me” to 6 = “is completely true for me”. Items included negative meta-emotions like anger, contempt, anxiety, sadness, shame or guilt, and positive meta-emotions like interest and compassionate care. Participants were instructed to rate statements “not as they think they should react but as their actual experiences are” (Table 1).

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ; Hayes et al., 2004): This scale measures EA as the unwillingness to get or stay in contact with internal experiences. The German translation of Sonntag (2005 personal communication) was back-translated and corrected for problematic phrases. Cronbach’s alpha of the English original is acceptable with .70 (Hayes et al., 2004).

Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003; German translation, Heidenreich & Michalak, personal communication): This 15-item scale measures awareness in everyday contexts and shows connections to dispositional affectivity, well-being, quality of life, etc. (German version alpha = .83; Ströhle, 2006).

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; German version, Sölva, Baumann, & Lettner, 1995): This commonly used scale consisting of five items assesses global life satisfaction on a cognitive-judgmental basis and has good internal reliability, test-retest reliability and validity.

Scales of Psychological well-being (SPWB; Ryff, 1989; German version, Staudinger, Lopez, & Baltes, 1997): This scale consists of 18 items with every three items comprising six subscales (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, self-acceptance); it is well-established and has acceptable psychometric properties.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Exploratory factor analysis

Two items were eliminated because of undue skewness or kurtosis. With the remaining 38 items, principal axis factor analysis (PFA) was performed (SPSS 15 for Windows, SPSS, IL: Chicago) and was favoured over principal components analysis (PCA), because of its advantages when higher-order factor rotations are performed (Floyd & Widaman, 1995). Varimax rotation was used to get maximum independence of (discrete emotion) factors, and

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