



Negative feedback and performance: The moderating effect of emotion regulation

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ABSTRACT

Whereas prior research has shown that individual differences in emotion regulation have important implications for relationships, affect and well-being, we investigated whether such individual differences also impact how people respond to negative feedback. Participants completed an ambiguous test on which they would be unable to gauge their performance. Some participants were told that they performed poorly, while others were told that they performed slightly above average. Participants then completed a second test that ostensibly measured a similar construct. Finally, after taking part in an unrelated task, participants completed the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) to assess reappraisal (thinking about a situation to change its emotional impact) and suppression (inhibiting emotion-expressive behavior). Among reappraisers, those who received negative feedback completed the second test more quickly and performed better than did such people who received moderate feedback. No such effects were found among suppressors. These findings suggest that individual differences in reappraisal and suppression are meaningful in terms of how negative feedback affects subsequent cognitive performance.

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1. Introduction

People use a variety of strategies to manage or regulate their emotions. According to the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), emotion response tendencies are coordinated responses that involve changes in expressive behavior, subjective experience and physiological systems (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). Emotion response tendencies are elicited only by situations evaluated as significant, such that they offer rewarding opportunities or aversive threats (Frijda, 1986). Once generated, emotion response tendencies can be modulated (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004), which will ultimately shape the observable emotional response. The process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) categorizes emotion regulation strategies according to when they impact this process, whether during the evaluation of potential emotional situations or during the modulation of response tendencies.

1.1. Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression

Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are two commonly investigated strategies of emotion regulation that can be differentiated in terms of whether they occur before or after emotion response tendencies have been triggered and have changed

physiological, behavioral and experiential responding (Gross, 2001; Gross & John, 2002; Gross, Richards, & John, 2006; John & Gross, 2004). *Cognitive reappraisal* is a strategy in which a person thinks about a situation to change its emotional impact. For example, a person utilizing cognitive reappraisal during a job interview might interpret the interview as an opportunity to learn more about a position rather than a judgment of his or her potential as an employee. As a result, the interview may not be evaluated as nerve-wracking and thus would not elicit corresponding response tendencies. For example, in an early study on cognitive reappraisal, Lazarus and Alfert (1964) found that leading participants to reappraise a film about a primitive ritual sub-incision as a joyful celebration (instead of a painful procedure) minimized physiological and subjective emotion responses.

Expressive suppression, in contrast, refers to the inhibition of emotion-expressive behavior (Gross & Levenson, 1993). Unlike cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression affects the modulation of emotion response tendencies already generated. For example, a person may suppress his or her feelings during an argument with friends by concealing his or her feelings of anger from others during the confrontation. Gross and Levenson (1993) found that, compared to control participants, participants assigned to suppress their emotions while watching a disgust-eliciting film demonstrated decreased emotion-expressive behavior (they were less likely to move/touch their face or body) but were equally likely to report feeling disgust. Suppression also produced a physiologically mixed state: signs of both greater arousal (increased

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cardiovascular, electrodermal responses, and blinking) and lesser arousal (decreased heart rate and somatic activity) were observed. This suggests that while suppression may inhibit expressive behavior, it may actually *increase* other aspects of the emotion response with changes in subjective experience and physiological systems.

1.2. Consequences of reappraisal and suppression

Cognitive reappraisal requires individuals to reinterpret a potentially emotion-eliciting situation so that it will be perceived as less emotional. Researchers have found that reappraisal decreases the experience of negative emotion. Specifically, Gross (2001) found that participants asked to reappraise an amputation film as though they were medical professionals reported feeling less disgust compared to participants assigned to either a suppression or control condition.

Unlike cognitive reappraisal which occurs before emotion response tendencies have been triggered, expressive suppression requires individuals to manage these rising emotion response tendencies. Such effortful management of response tendencies has been found to require cognitive resources that could otherwise be used for functioning in emotional contexts. Richards and Gross (2000), for example, found that participants asked to suppress while watching a film eliciting negative emotion showed poorer memory of auditory and visual details of the film compared to participants given no such instruction. This suggests that there are cognitive costs to suppression, specifically poorer recognition and recall.

1.3. Individual differences in emotion regulation

There is an extensive literature investigating individual differences in people's emotional responses. One such area involves emotional intelligence, the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions (cf. Mayer & Salovey, 1997). A wide body of research has shown that the construct predicts a variety of important life outcomes. For example, children higher in emotional intelligence are more socially competent (Denham et al., 2003) and perform better academically (O'Connor & Little, 2003), while adults higher in emotional intelligence are more productive in the workplace (Elfenbein, Der Foo, White, & Tan, 2007) and more satisfied with their lives (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999; see Mayer, Barsade, & Roberts, 2008, for a review).

Stemming from this body of work, other researchers were interested to learn *which specific strategies* people use when they attempt to regulate emotions. This interest prompted research on individual differences in emotion regulation. Most significantly, Gross and John (2003) developed the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) to measure the habitual use of suppression and reappraisal. The ERQ includes a six-item reappraisal scale and a four-item suppression scale. For example, two items assessing reappraisal are, "When I want to feel more positive emotion (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about," and, "When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation." Two items assessing suppression are, "I keep my emotions to myself," and, "When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them." Gross and John (2003) examined the convergent validity of the ERQ by assessing how cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are related to four conceptually relevant constructs: perceived emotion regulation success, inauthenticity, coping style, and mood management. They found that reappraisal and suppression were related to these constructs to varying degrees as would be predicted by the general process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). Gross and John (2003) also assessed the

divergent validity of the ERQ by examining associations between these two emotion regulation strategies and the Big Five personality dimensions, as well as impulse control, cognitive ability and social desirability. Correlations between emotion regulation strategy and these four constructs were significant but modest (β s < .41) suggesting that the ERQ converged with these conceptually similar personality dimensions but is not simply an indicator of any of them. Finally, the scale was shown to be reliable both internally (α s > .73) and in terms of test-retest reliability (r s = .69).

The ERQ has been used to predict meaningful outcomes. For example, Gross and John (2002) administered the ERQ and asked participants to complete self-ratings of their emotion experience. Gross and John (2003) found that cognitive reappraisal was related to more positive emotion experience and less negative emotion experience. Further, in a study attesting to the ERQ's ability to predict meaningful cognitive consequences, Richards and Gross (2000) assessed participants' memory using two measures: by asking participants how well they generally remember conversations and by asking participants to complete a free-recall test of their own emotion regulation episodes (that they had been reporting to the experimenter for two weeks). Participants who habitually used suppression had worse self-reported memory and had poorer memory of the emotion regulation episodes. Therefore, there appear to be cognitive costs for expressive suppression but not for cognitive reappraisal.

Clearly, then, a person's chronic style of emotion regulation plays a role in a variety of situations. One situation which has yet to be investigated in the context of emotion regulation, however, is a situation in which a person receives negative feedback after performing a task. Such situations are common in everyday life, whether it be a student learning that he or she performed poorly on an examination or a salesperson learning that he or she was not successful in "closing" a contract. How might a person's dispositional style of emotion regulation impact his or her response to negative feedback? To gain insight into this question, we turn to research on how personality moderates the effects of negative feedback.

1.4. Negative feedback and personality

In an early study on negative feedback, Waterhouse and Child (1953) assessed whether the effects of such feedback on subsequent performance would differ as a function of personality. These researchers found that the effect of negative feedback on ongoing performance varies with participants' dispositional habits of responding to frustration. Waterhouse and Child (1953) asked participants to respond to a personality questionnaire that included six scales measuring the participants' tendency to respond to frustration with preoccupation, "defendance," aggression, pessimism, self-aggression or distractibility. Scores on these six scales were combined to form an overall measure of the tendency to habitually respond to frustration with disruptive reactions. Participants who scored above the median of the overall measure formed the "high-interference" group, while participants who scored below the median formed the "low-interference" group. Results showed that negative feedback produced poorer performance among participants in the high-interference group, whereas negative feedback produced enhanced performance among low-interference participants. In a similar vein, Shrauger and Rosenberg (1970) showed that participants high in self esteem reported exerting more effort in a future task following negative feedback. Also, Idson and Higgins (2000) found that promotion-effective participants performed better on a task after receiving success feedback, while prevention-effective participants performed better on the task after receiving failure feedback.

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