



Negative emotionality and emotion regulation: A person-centered approach to predicting socioemotional adjustment in young adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Emotionality and emotion regulation are presumed to interact to produce social behavior. Prior empirical evidence for this interaction has been weak. Researchers have tended to take a variable-centered approach to predicting social behavior and this may have obscured the relations between negative emotionality, emotion regulation, and social behavior. Therefore, a person-centered approach was used to examine the links among these variables. Two-hundred and three adolescents (M age = 13.3 years) completed measures of negative emotionality, emotion regulation, and socioemotional behavior. Cluster analysis suggested four profiles of adolescents: those moderate on regulation and negative emotionality, those low in both, those high in negative emotionality and low in regulation, those low in negative emotionality and high in regulation. LDF analysis suggested that these profiles of adolescents differed along two dimensions on socioemotional behavior.

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1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in studying emotions, including their expression and regulation. Part of the interest in studying emotion comes from the recognition that children's emotional expression, regulation, and experience are directly related to the quality of their relationships with others (Denahm et al., 2003). Researchers studying emotion have focused both on how emotional experiences are socialized in the context of close relationships and on the role that temperament, or relatively stable and typically biologically based traits, plays in children's expression and experience with emotion (e.g., Denham, 1998). Researchers studying temperament, in particular, have focused on both the degree to which individuals differ in the ease to which emotions are aroused, i.e., emotionality, and then once aroused, the degree to which emotions can be regulated (Eisenberg et al., 1995; Rubin, Coplan, Fox, & Calkins, 1995; Rydell, Berlin, & Bohlin, 2003). In fact, Rothbart and her colleagues have argued that the primary components of temperament involve emotionality and emotion regulation (Rothbart & Bates, 2006).

In general, researchers have tended to separate emotionality into positive and negative emotionality (see Durbin, Hayden, Klein, & Olino, 2007; Wetter & Hankin, 2009). The bulk of the research, however, has focused on negative emotionality and the links it

shares with problematic behavior (see e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2005; Paulussen-Hoogbeem et al., 2008; Rhee et al., 2007). Researchers have found consistent links between negative emotionality and externalizing behavior, internalizing problems, and adjustment difficulties (see e.g., Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994; Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2005; Lengua, West, & Sandler, 1998). Given the close links that negative emotionality shares with depression, anxiety, and aggression, it is not surprising that negative emotionality is a defining characteristic of many types of psychopathology (Thoits, 1985).

On the other hand, theorists have argued and found support for the idea that negative emotionality is closely linked to the experience of moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt, and these emotions have been associated with low levels of aggression and high levels of prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992). In general, research has supported the idea that there are close links between all of the negative emotions. For example, researchers have found consistent links between guilt and shame and the other negative emotions, including fear, anger, anxiety, and sadness (see e.g., Forgas, 1994; Harder, Cutler, & Rockart, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1992). Similarly, high levels of negative emotionality have been associated with higher levels of empathy, sympathy, and personal distress (see Eisenberg (2000) for a review). Adolescents who are high in moral emotions have been found to exhibit less aggressive behavior and more prosocial and socially competent behavior (see Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Laible, Eye, & Carlo, 2008).

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Although at first glance, the findings from the research on negative emotionality seem to be contradictory, it is only because researchers have often failed to take into account the role that emotion regulation plays in moderating the link between negative emotionality and socioemotional competence. Emotion regulation, which has been defined as the “extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions” (Thompson, 1994, pp. 27–28) has been implicated in socially responsive behavior. Researchers have stressed that emotionality and emotion regulation are separate dimensions of temperament (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999; Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997; Underwood, 1997) that both mutually influence children’s social competence. In general, measures of negative emotionality and regulation have been only moderately correlated in past research (Eisenberg et al., 1993, 1997). Hypothetically, thus, it is possible to imagine children who are either high in negative emotionality and regulation, low in both, or high on one dimension or the other (Rydell et al., 2003).

Independent of negative emotionality, emotion regulation has been found to relate to socially competent behavior. Individuals high in emotion regulation tend to experience sympathy (i.e., other-focused concern) rather than personal distress (self-focused concern) when faced with another person’s distress (Guthrie et al., 1997). Well-regulated individuals faced with another person’s distress have the cognitive resources necessary to focus on the other person, rather than on coping with their own negative emotion. In addition, high levels of emotion regulation have been linked with fewer externalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 1995, 1997; Nelson, Martin, Hodge, Havill, & Kamphaus, 1999) and fewer internalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Rydell, Thorell, & Bohlin, 2007). Finally, individuals high in emotion regulation have also been found to be higher in prosocial behavior and social competence (Eisenberg & Fabes, 2006; Rydell et al., 2003).

Ultimately, a number of researchers have proposed that emotion regulation should moderate the influence of negative emotionality on social and emotional behavior. In particular, High negative emotionality is only hypothesized to be problematic for children and adolescents when they are also low in emotion regulation (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992, 2006). It is these children and adolescents who are high in negative emotionality and not well-regulated who are hypothesized to have problems with aggression and angry outbursts (i.e., negative dominant expressiveness) and to be more likely to experience self-focused emotion (i.e., personal distress) in the face of another’s distress. As a result, these individuals might also be less likely to be prosocial and help others in need (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

In contrast, children and adolescents who are high or moderate in negative emotionality might be well-adjusted socially if they are also well-regulated. A number of researchers have argued that these individuals might be emotionally expressive, sociable, and prone to positive social behavior (see Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992). What is less clear, however, is how individuals low in negative emotionality and either low or high in regulation might compare on measures of social and emotional behavior. For instance, if some degree of negative emotionality is needed to experience moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt, individuals lacking negative emotionality might be less socially competent. Eisenberg and Fabes (1992) argued that individuals who are highly controlled in terms of emotion regulation and low in negative emotionality might be flat in affect, unsociable, and prone to social withdrawal. On the other hand, individuals who are undercontrolled in terms of emotion regulation and low in negative emotionality might be prone to aggression and manipulative behavior, low in prosocial and positive behavior, and not well-liked by peers (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992).

Despite the frequent arguments by a number of researchers (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992, 2006; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, et al.,

1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, et al., 1997; Rydell et al., 2003) for the moderating influence of emotion regulation on negative emotionality, the evidence of the two constructs interacting to produce socioemotional competence has been inconsistent at best, often demonstrated only in a single context, only for one gender, or for outcome measures provided only by one reporter, or not found at all (Belsky, Friedman, & Hsieh, 2001; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, et al., 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, et al., 1997; Eisenberg, Shepard, Fabes, Murphy, & Guthrie, 1998; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Rydell et al., 2003). Thus, ultimately, as Rothbart and Bates (1998) argue, even though there is plenty of evidence that negative emotionality and emotion regulation have independent effects on social and emotional behavior, the evidence for the two constructs interacting is weak.

One reason for the lack of consistency in the research on the combined influence of negative emotionality and emotion regulation in predicting socioemotional behavior may have to do with the fact that researchers have tended to focus on a variable-centered approach to examining the links between negative emotionality, emotion regulation, and socioemotional behavior. This approach, though useful, is more limited because it tends to treat traits as independent entities and tends to ignore the organization of traits (such as negative emotionality and emotion regulation) within an individual (Hart, Atkins, Fegley, Robins, & Tracy, 2003). Indeed, temperamental dimensions such as negative emotionality and emotion regulation have been theorized to overlap with, and influence, each other (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1988; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992); thus, violating a basic assumption of least squares analytic techniques. Therefore, a variable-centered analysis may have obscured the empirical links that negative emotionality and emotion regulation have with social behavior.

An alternative approach in this case might be to take a person-oriented approach to predicting socioemotional competence from profiles of negative emotionality and emotion regulation. A person-centered approach assumes that the individual is an organized whole in which each aspect of structure and process (such as negative emotionality and emotion regulation) takes on meaning based upon its role within the entire organization of the individual (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). For example, one such person-oriented approach is to use cluster analyses to identify groups of adolescents according to their scores on multiple characteristics (such as negative emotionality and emotion regulation). Moreover, a key advance of using a cluster analytic technique is that patterns of variables can be meaningfully linked with one another in ways that are not revealed by a least squares analyses. Person-centered approaches are consistent with a recent emphasis on personality types, which emphasize the organization of traits within an individual, as opposed to trait approaches (such as the Five-Factor Model) that look at how individual dimensions of personality, such as extraversion, influence behavior (Asendorpf, 2002; Hart et al., 2003).

However, it is worth noting, that cluster analytic approaches have not been without criticism. Several recent critiques of the approach have argued that it is often hard to replicate clusters across samples (Costa, Herbst, McCrae, Samuels, & Ozer, 2002). These same critics have suggested that trait approaches (i.e., variable-centered approaches) are more precise, because typology approaches (i.e., person-centered approaches) lose information when individuals are forced into categories (Costa et al., 2002). As a result, even though the current study takes a cluster analytic approach to exploring the links between negative emotionality, emotion regulation, and socioemotional competence, the variable-centered data is also presented to compare and contrast the two approaches.

Thus, this study planned to examine the profiles of adolescents based upon negative emotionality and emotion regulation and to investigate how these profiles might be related to adolescent social

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