



Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for use with athletes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 January 2011

Received in revised form

4 May 2012

Accepted 5 May 2012

Available online 21 May 2012

Keywords:

Reappraisal

Suppression

Affect

Mood

Psychological skills

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Three studies examine the factorial validity, internal consistency, test–retest stability, and criterion validity of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ: Gross & John, 2003) for use with athletes.

Design: Factorial validity, internal consistency, test–retest stability and criterion validity of the ERQ were examined over three stages, using three separate samples.

Method: In stage 1 the factorial validity and internal consistency of the ERQ subscales were examined based on responses from 433 sport participants. In stage 2, 176 sport participants completed the ERQ on two occasions separated by an interval of two weeks. In stage 3, the criterion validity of the ERQ was examined. Sport participants ($n = 88$) completed the ERQ and reported the intensity, frequency and direction of a range of emotions experienced when competing in sport.

Results: Confirmatory factor analysis results lend some support to a two-factor model when reappraisal and suppression are allowed to correlate. Alpha coefficients were acceptable. Test–retest stability analyses indicated poor agreement and a greater influence of situational, as opposed to trait factors, in the variance of item scores on the second test administration. In addition, results were partially consistent with findings of Gross and John (2003): reappraisal scores were associated with pleasant emotions, but suppression scores were not associated with unpleasant emotions.

Conclusion: Results provide mixed support for the validity of the ERQ in sport. Because the ERQ is intended to assess stable patterns of emotion regulation, the instability of items is a concern and reasons for this require further investigation.

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Whether it is anxiety about returning after an injury, embarrassment about making a mistake, anger at a contentious decision by an umpire, or excitement at the prospect of winning, athletes¹ experience a range of emotions prior to, during, and after competitive sport (Hanin, 2000; Lane & Terry, 2000; Uphill & Jones, 2007). Emotions are not only an intrinsic part of competitive sport, they are widely believed to influence sport performance.

Consequently, the ability to regulate emotions successfully is regarded by many as an important psychological skill (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Jones, 2003; Robazza, Pellizzari, & Hanin, 2004).

Although most humans are able to recognise, and report experiencing, a variety of “emotions”, because emotion is a term derived from everyday language, identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as an emotion has been plagued with difficulty (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Increasingly researchers have adopted prototype definitions (e.g., Russell & Fehr, 1994), with the essence of emotion being described by Frederickson (2001) as a cognitively appraised reaction to an event, either conscious or non-conscious that “triggers a cascade of response tendencies across loosely coupled component systems, such as subjective experience, facial expression, cognitive processing, and physiological changes” (p.218). In addition, some researchers include a behavioural component (e.g., action tendencies) in the emotional response (see Gross, 1998; Russell, 2003).

These features of emotion have a range of intra-personal and interpersonal consequences (see Jones, 2003; Uphill, McCarthy, &

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¹ We use the terms “athlete” and “sports participants” interchangeably throughout this manuscript. Although it might be argued that “athlete” represents a particular type of sport participant, perhaps one that has attained a specific level of competence, we use “athlete” synonymously with sport participant to embrace all those who participate regularly in sport. It’s our opinion that the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire is not applicable only to those sports participants who may be considered elite for example, but also to those individuals who may experience embarrassment when trying a new sport for the first time.

Jones, 2009; Vallerand & Blanchard, 2000). For example, heightened muscle tension could lead to a decrement in fine motor control (Noteboom, Fleshner, & Enoka, 2001), changes in what information is being attended to might influence decision-making (Schwarz, 2000), and how emotions are displayed and communicated may influence social functioning (Gross & John, 2003).

Emotion regulation can be defined as the evocation of thoughts or behaviours that influence the emotions that people experience, when people have them, and how people experience or express these emotions (Richards & Gross, 2000; Uphill et al., 2009). Emotion regulation broadly encompasses attempts to evoke, diminish, prolong or intensify emotional experience, cognition, expression and/or physiology (cf. Gross, 1999; Gross & Thompson, 2007).

The vast majority of literature examining emotion regulation has been conducted in domains of psychology other than sport (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Viewing sport as just one of many arenas in which individuals may wish to regulate their emotions, we contend that (a) such empirical work has utility in this domain, and (b) because sport represents a rich and dynamic laboratory for the assessment of emotion regulation, examining emotion regulation could lead to advances applicable to other domains of psychological inquiry.

The ways in which emotions can be regulated are almost limitless with over 400 strategies being identified in the literature broadly (Augustine & Hemenover, 2009; Richards & Gross, 2000). Based on the premise that emotions unfold over time, Gross (1998) proposed a model of emotion regulation in which certain strategies have their primary impact at different stages of the emotion-generation process (cf. Balzarotti, John, & Gross, 2010). The first four of these categories (situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change) have been classified as “antecedent-focussed” emotion regulation, which includes attempts to generate and/or inhibit the arousal of emotional responses. In contrast, the fifth category (response modulation) involves attempts to change the characteristics of emotions that have been triggered, effectively “mopping-up” or altering the “emotional punch” (Gross, 1998, 2008; Richards & Gross, 2000). Within these two broad classes of emotion regulation more subtle differences may be made: antecedent-focussed strategies may involve reappraisal (type of cognitive change) whilst response-focussed strategies may include suppression (Gross, 1998).²

Antecedent-focussed emotion regulation is purported to have different consequences than response-focussed emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). In the regulation of unpleasant emotions for example, antecedent-focussed regulation has been demonstrated to decrease

the intensity of subjective, physiological and expressive symptoms. For suppression there is a tendency for the behavioural expression of emotion to decrease as opposed to the subjective or physiological components of emotion (cf. John & Gross, 2007). In addition, emotional suppression has been demonstrated to exact a comparatively heavy cognitive cost (Richards & Gross, 2000). Specifically, the self-regulatory processes involved in inhibiting the expression of emotion depleted attentional resources available for memory, whereas reappraisal exacted little cognitive cost (Richards & Gross, 2000; for a review see Gross, 2008). Collectively, at least in domains other than sport, evidence suggests that reappraisal has a more adaptive profile compared to suppression.

To measure individual differences in use of reappraisal and suppression, Gross and John (2003) developed the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Evidence suggests that the ERQ possesses adequate factorial validity, internal consistency, test–retest reliability and criterion validity (Gross & John, 2003), and has been validated in different languages (e.g., Balzarotti et al., 2010). Scores on the ERQ relate to several coping measures and results generally show that reappraisal is associated with positive adaptations including pleasant emotions whereas suppression is associated with negative adaptations and unpleasant emotions (John & Gross, 2007).

Given divergent outcomes associated with individual differences in the disposition to use reappraisal and suppression, a measure that could identify athletes’ use of both these emotion regulation strategies could be beneficial to sport psychologists both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it is plausible that emotion regulation strategies may in part mediate the variability in the emotion–performance relationship observed between individuals (cf. Hanin, 2000; Jones & Uphill, 2011). Practically, if reappraisal is a preferred emotion regulation strategy, by using the ERQ to identify athletes’ habitual use of reappraisal and suppression, interventions directed towards enhancing suppressors’ increased habitual use of reappraisal could be monitored and evaluated.

The utility of an instrument depends fundamentally upon its psychometric properties and it would be erroneous to assume that instruments are valid across different populations and contexts (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2009). For example, items associated with behavioural emotion regulation demonstrated to be valid in one context (Niven, Totterdell, Stride, & Holman, 2011) were often associated with weak factor loadings in sport (Lane, Beedie, Stanley, & Devonport, 2011). If validity has not been demonstrated, it is hazardous to accept and apply data derived from such measures (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Schutz & Gessaroli, 1993). Indeed, although there is widespread use of the ERQ, evidence in support of the stability of the scale is lacking. In the original validity paper, Gross and John (2003) reported a test–retest reliability of .69 over a 3 month period and concluded that individuals’ reports about their habitual use of reappraisal and suppression are moderately stable over time. Gross and John found less than 50% common variance between test–retest measures, which could lead to interpreting the stability of the scale differently.

The stability of the ERQ is an important feature for sport psychologists. On the one hand, considerable evidence suggests that emotion regulation use can be changed through guided training (Robazza et al., 2004), self-help interventions (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008), and via self-regulation (Augustine & Hemenover, 2009). If training leads to changes in habitual use of emotion regulation strategies, then it is conceivable that such change should be reflected on changes in scores on the ERQ. On the other hand, in the absence of any training and deliberate attempts to self-regulate, test–retest responses to the ERQ should show stability.

² Although there are clear parallels between emotion regulation and coping, with much contemporary research on emotion regulation stemming, at least in part, from research on coping (Gross, 1999), the two are not synonymous. As Gross (1999) indicates, the literature on coping does not entirely subsume emotion regulation in that emotion regulation includes processes typically not included in the coping literature, such as regulating expressive or physiological aspects of emotions, or regulating positively valenced emotions. Coping represents a broader category than emotion regulation and may refer to protracted efforts to cope with diverse stressors such as illness or injury, which may involve, but not be limited to the regulation of emotion. In addition coping is frequently conceptualised as conscious cognitive and/or behavioural efforts to deal with internal and/or external demands appraised as exceeding the resources of individuals (Anshel, 2001; Cramer, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This contrasts somewhat with emotion regulation strategies which include both conscious and non-conscious strategies within its remit (Gross, 1999). Although space precludes a full discussion of the similarities and differences between coping and emotion, limitations in the measurement of coping strategies (Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998), alongside differences in the foci of the respective theories, suggest that an instrument designed to specifically address the emotion regulation strategies employed by athletes is warranted.

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