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A person-centered approach to adolescent emotion regulation: Associations with psychopathology and parenting



Caitlin C. Turpyn^{a,*}, Tara M. Chaplin^a, Emily C. Cook^b, Alexandra M. Martelli^a

^a Department of Psychology, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA

^b Department of Psychology, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908, USA

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a unique period of heightened emotional arousal and still-developing regulatory abilities. Adolescent emotion regulation patterns may be critically involved in adolescents' psychosocial development, but patterns of emotion regulation in youths are not well understood. The current study used latent profile analysis (LPA) to elucidate patterns of emotion expression, experience, and emotion-related physiological arousal in adolescents. A sample of 198 adolescents and their primary caregivers participated in an emotionally arousing parent–adolescent conflict interaction. Adolescents' observed emotion expressions, emotion experiences, and heart rate (HR) and caregiver parenting behaviors were assessed during and/or after the interaction. Parents reported on adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and youths reported on depressive symptoms. The LPA revealed four emotion regulation profiles: a moderate HR and high expression profile, a suppression profile (with low negative emotion expression and high emotion experience), a low reactive profile, and a high reactive profile. The moderate HR and high expression profile was associated with lower conduct disorder symptoms, the suppression profile was related to lower anxiety symptoms, and the high reactive profile was associated with higher adolescent depressive symptoms. The high reactive profile and moderate HR and high expression profile were associated with more negative/critical parenting behaviors. Findings suggest that profiles of adolescent

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 703 993 1359.

E-mail address: cmauger@gmu.edu (C.C. Turpyn).

emotion regulation can be empirically identified and may be significant risk factors for psychopathology.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a dynamic developmental period during which a series of hormonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes occur, leading to a heightened system of emotional arousal and a still-developing regulatory control system (Galvan et al., 2006; Steinberg, 2005). Effective regulation of heightened emotional states is critical in navigating the novel stressors of adolescence such as puberty and shifting peer and family relationships (Eccles et al., 1993). Emotion regulation refers to the process by which emotions are automatically or volitionally monitored and modulated to facilitate a desired state or goal through internal processes and also external interpersonal influences (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Thompson, 1994). Adolescents who experience difficulties in regulating their emotions are vulnerable to poor social relationships and to internalizing and externalizing disorders, and they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as substance use (Bradley, 2003; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003). Within-person variability in adolescents' responses across emotion domains (e.g., expression, subjective experience, physiology) may reflect meaningful patterns of emotion regulation (Zalewski, Lengua, Wilson, Trancik, & Bazinet, 2011b), perhaps affecting current and future mental health (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). Therefore, understanding types of emerging emotion regulation patterns in youths may provide insight into the development and progression of psychopathology and risk behaviors during a critical period for emotional development.

Emotions are considered to be dynamic multisystem responses that include expressive, experiential (e.g., self-reported emotion), and physiological components. Early theories of emotion suggest a concordance model of emotion—that all types of emotion systems respond in concert to produce a coherent emotional response (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1979). For example, in a concordance model, anger may be expected to manifest in facial expressions (Izard, 1979), appraisal of experience as anger, and increased physiological reactivity (Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983). However, accumulating research reports a relative lack of correlation among expected emotion response systems in direction and magnitude (Mauss & Robinson, 2009). This lack of association is often called emotion discordance (e.g., Evers et al., 2014; Hollenstein & Lanteigne, 2014; Lanteigne, Flynn, Eastabrook, & Hollenstein, 2012; Mauss, Levenson, McCarter, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2005). Some research suggests that emotion discordance may result from emotion regulatory processes (Butler, Gross, & Barnard, 2013; Hollenstein & Lanteigne, 2014; Lewis, 2011). That is, the down- or up-regulation of emotion may affect certain emotion domains (e.g., expression) more than others (e.g., physiology), thereby resulting in emotional discordance among systems. For that reason, patterns of emotion discordance may indicate the presence of some form of emotion regulation.

Theoretical models of emotion discordance/emotion regulation patterns

Varying patterns of activation across emotion domains appear in a number of theoretical models of emotion with implications for emotion regulation and psychopathology. For one, Gross's (1998a, 2002) process model describes one response-focused emotion regulation strategy, expressive suppression, a strategy that reflects a distinct pattern of emotion discordance. Specifically, expressive suppression refers to high levels of subjective emotion experience and high physiological arousal but low expression of emotion (Gross, 1998a, 1998b; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Harris, 2001; Richards & Gross, 1999). Indeed, Butler and colleagues (2013) found that participants prompted to suppress the expression of their emotions showed reduced emotional concordance across continuous measures of emotion expressive behavior and physiology, presumably with low expressive behavior but moderate or high physiology. Importantly, the consistent use of emotion regulation strategies such as

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