



The unique relations between emotional awareness and facets of affective instability

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ABSTRACT

The relation between affective instability and two facets of emotional awareness, attention to emotion and clarity of emotion, was examined in two community samples ($N_s = 303, 101$) and one student sample ($N = 409$). Affective instability was positively associated with attention to emotion and negatively associated with clarity of emotion. The two facets of affective instability, affect intensity and emotional variability, were differentially associated with the two components of emotional awareness. As hypothesized, affect intensity was uniquely associated with attention to emotion, whereas emotional variability was uniquely (inversely) associated with clarity of emotion even after taking into account shared variance with neuroticism and gender.

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1. Introduction

Emotional experiences can be parsed into several different dimensions, such as valence, intensity, frequency, and duration (e.g., Schimmack, Oishi, Diener, & Suh, 2000). The present studies examined two of these aspects of emotional experience, emotional variability (sometimes referred to as affective lability; Harvey, Greenberg, & Serper, 1989) and affect intensity (Larsen, 2009; Larsen & Diener, 1987). Although emotional variability and affect intensity are positively correlated (e.g., Emmons & King, 1989; Larsen, 1987; Larsen & Diener, 1987; Oliver & Simons, 2004) and are often considered important facets of affective instability (Henry et al., 2001; Koenigsberg et al., 2002; Larsen, 1987; Miller & Pilkonis, 2006), we tested the hypothesis that they would be uniquely associated with different facets of emotional awareness. We also assessed whether any relations found between facets of affective instability and aspects of emotional awareness would remain after controlling for neuroticism and gender, two variables that have been found to be associated with facets of both affective instability and emotional awareness (e.g., Luminet, Bagby, Wagner, Taylor, & Parker, 1999; Murray, Allen, & Trinder, 2002).

In the present research we examined two facets of emotional awareness, attention to emotion and clarity of emotion. Attention to emotion refers to the extent to which one notices, thinks about, and monitors one's moods. Clarity of emotion refers to how clearly one understands one's own emotions, discriminates among one's

own emotions, and knows how to label these emotions. Several theorists have pointed out that having access to one's own feelings as well as being able to discriminate and label them are vital to adaptively using emotional information (e.g., Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Given the potential importance of emotional awareness for emotion regulation, we expected emotional awareness to be associated with affective instability. Furthermore, we hypothesized that different facets of emotional awareness would be differentially associated with different facets of affective instability. We hypothesized that (a) clarity of emotion would be inversely associated with emotional variability; and (b) attention to emotion would be positively associated with affect intensity.

Our hypotheses are rooted in the distinction made by Gross (1998a, 1998b) between (a) antecedent-focused emotion regulation, which refers to factors that influence emotion regulation prior to an emotion being elicited; and (b) response-focused emotion regulation, which refers to factors that influence emotion regulation after an emotion has already been elicited. We argue that emotional variability is a reflection of poor antecedent-focused emotion regulation, and is weakly, if at all, associated with response-focused emotion regulation. This hypothesis is based on the view that emotional variability is a reflection of emotions being easily but inconsistently elicited by emotion-eliciting events and circumstance, a pattern that would be expected among individuals with poor antecedent-focused emotion regulation. Furthermore, we propose that the same knowledge and skills used to obtain clarity regarding one's emotions, such as being aware of one's own needs and goals, are used to engage in antecedent-focused emotion regulation. Therefore, we hypothesized that emotional clarity would be associated with emotional variability. This hypothesis is consistent with the

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¹ The first two authors, R.T. and M.D., independently examined the main issues addressed in this paper.

evidence that clarity of emotions is associated with how aware and clear one is about one's needs (Dizen, Berenbaum, & Kerns, 2005) and the view that emotion elicitation is tied to individuals' goals, needs, and concerns being met or unmet (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990; Lazarus, 1991).

We argue that affect intensity is, in part, a reflection of poor response-focused emotion regulation, and is less strongly associated with antecedent-focused emotion regulation. This hypothesis is based on the view that just as (a) ruminating is associated with prolonged periods of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993); and (b) focusing on future related threats (i.e., worrying) is associated with increased anxiety (Borkovec, Roemer, & Kinyon, 1995), the process of attending to, if not perseverating about, one's emotions can lead those feelings to intensify. Therefore, we hypothesized that attention to emotion would be associated with affect intensity. This hypothesis is consistent with the findings of Gohm and Clore (2002) that individuals who reported higher levels of affect intensity also tended to report paying greater attention to their emotions.

We also explored the possibilities that associations between affective instability and emotional awareness were merely artifacts of shared variance with neuroticism and gender. The distinction between neuroticism and affective instability has been made by Miller and Pilkonis (2006). Nonetheless, past research has found associations between neuroticism and the two facets of affect instability we are examining (i.e., affect intensity and emotional variability; e.g., Eid & Diener, 1999; Gohm & Clore, 2002; Hepburn & Eysenck, 1989; McConville & Cooper, 1999; Murray et al., 2002; Williams, 1993). Similarly, some facets of emotional awareness have been found to be associated with negative affectivity/neuroticism (e.g., Luminet et al., 1999). Along the same lines, some research has found that women report higher attention to emotion than do men (e.g., Thompson, Waltz, Croyle, & Pepper, 2007).

Our hypotheses concerning the relation between affective instability and emotional awareness were tested in a series of three samples. The samples varied in terms of: (a) participant demographics (e.g., community residents vs. college students); (b) whether affective instability was assessed using an interview and/or questionnaire measures of affect intensity and emotional variability; and (c) whether neuroticism was also measured.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

2.1.1. Sample 1

The first sample of participants was 303 adults (53% female) between the ages of 18 and 89 years ($M = 43.2$; $SD = 17.6$).² The sample was mostly European American (79%) with 9% African American, 5% Asian American/Asian, 3% Latino/a, and 1% Native American. The remaining 3% indicated being biracial or endorsed the category of "other." A total of 54% had earned a college degree, 32% reported "some" college, 13% completed high school, and 1% reported not completing high school. Participants were recruited through telephone interviews or via advertising. The data were collected as part of a project examining pathways to disturbed emotions, perceptions, and beliefs (Berenbaum, Thompson, Milanak, Boden, & Bredemeier, 2008). As part of this larger project, participants completed a variety of interviews, tasks, and self-report measures. They provided informed consent and were monetarily compensated for their participation.

² Individuals who met schizophrenia criterion A ($n = 7$), who did not complete the research protocol ($n = 6$), and whose data were deemed invalid ($n = 2$) are not included in the present sample of 303 participants.

2.1.2. Sample 2

The second sample of participants was 409 undergraduate students (54.0% female). The participants ranged in age from 16 to 33 years ($M = 19.3$, $SD = 1.9$). The sample consisted of 75% European American, 11% African American, 6% Asian American, 5% Latino/a, and 2% Native American. The remaining 1% endorsed the category of "other." Participants provided informed consent and completed a series of self-report instruments, some of which are described below. Participants received partial course credit for their time.

2.1.3. Sample 3

The third sample consisted of 101 female participants from the community.³ Participants were recruited for a larger longitudinal study investigating rejection within romantic relationships. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 21 years old and in a serious romantic relationship for less than 1 year. Participants who were previously married or had children were not eligible. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 37 years ($M = 23.1$; $SD = 2.7$). The ethnic/racial make-up of the participants was as follows: 70% European American, 13% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 7% Latina, and 6% African American. The remaining 4% indicated being biracial or endorsed the category of "other." Participants completed a series of interviews and self-report instruments at their initial session, including the ones described below.⁴ Participants provided informed consent and were monetarily compensated for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Attention to and clarity of emotion

For all three samples, attention to and clarity of emotion were assessed using the relevant scales of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995). Using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item. The clarity of emotion scale has eleven items (e.g., "I am usually very clear about my feelings"); the attention to emotion scale has 13 items (e.g., "I pay a lot of attention to how I feel"). Self-report measures of attention to emotion and clarity of emotion, including the TMMS, have been found to be associated in theoretically predicted ways with scores on other self-report questionnaires (see Gohm & Clore, 2002, for a review), as well as with behavioral/performance-based measures (e.g., Coffey, Berenbaum, & Kerns, 2003; Dizen et al., 2005; Gasper & Clore, 2000). Internal consistencies for Samples 1, 2, and 3, respectively, were (a) .85, .87, and .82 for attention to emotion; and (b) .85, .87, and .87 for clarity of emotion.

2.2.2. Unidimensional affective instability

For Samples 1 and 3, we used the Personality Disorder Interview-IV (PDI-IV; Widiger, Mangine, Corbitt, Ellis, & Thomas, 1995) borderline personality disorder module to assess the criterion of affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood. In this semi-structured interview, participants are asked a series of questions (e.g., "Does your mood tend to shift from one feeling to another, even during the same day?", and "When you feel angry (happy), do you tend to feel *really* angry (happy)?"). These questions are followed up as needed for clarification, with the trained interviewers making dimensional ratings of affective instability

³ One individual who met criteria for bipolar I disorder with psychotic features is not included in the present sample of 101 participants.

⁴ All participants completed the affective instability interview. However, due to time constraints and the order of the questionnaire packet, only 98 participants completed the AIM, 94 participants completed the TMMS, and 87 participants completed the ALS.

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