



# Individual differences in the regulation of positive emotion: The role of attachment and self esteem



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## ABSTRACT

Individual differences in the regulation of positive emotion are associated with psychological resilience and well being. This study investigated the relationship between attachment, self esteem and gender and the regulation of positive emotion. 174 participants completed an online battery measuring attachment avoidance and anxiety, global self esteem and positive emotion regulation strategies (dampening and savouring). Moderating moderation analyses indicated that attachment insecurity was associated with maladaptive regulation of positive emotion. Savouring of positive emotion was predicted by attachment avoidance but not anxiety. Dampening of positive emotion was predicted by avoidance and self esteem and by the interaction of attachment anxiety with self esteem. Correlations between attachment and specific dampening and savouring strategies are discussed. The results are discussed within the broader context of attachment-related differences in emotion regulation.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability to regulate emotion contingently and flexibly has been widely associated with indices of mental well being and psychological resilience (Côté, Gyurak, & Levenson, 2010; Gross, 2007). Furthermore, it has been recognised that individuals differ in the ability to regulate emotion effectively therefore research into emotion regulation (ER) has attempted to find antecedents of, and associations with, these individual differences with a view to further elaborating theories of ER (e.g., John & Eng, 2014; Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006). In the last 30 years, attachment has provided a coherent framework for understanding individual differences mainly in the regulation of negatively-valenced emotion (e.g., Mikulincer, Dolev, & Shaver, 2004; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). It has not yet, however, been systematically applied to the investigation of attachment in relation to positive emotion. This study set out to investigate whether attachment-related differences in the regulation of positive emotion exist, through examining the relationship between dimensions of attachment insecurity (avoidance and anxiety) and two basic regulatory devices (dampening and savouring) in relation to positive emotion.

### 1.1. Background

ER is conceptualized as the process by which individuals consciously or non-consciously modulate their emotions in response to environmental demands (Bargh & Williams, 2007). Theoretical models of ER associate adaptive and flexible ER with good mental health outcomes and conversely maladaptive ER with mental health disorders (e.g., Garnefski, Teerds, Kraaij, Legerstee, & van den Kommer, 2004; Gross, 2007). Increasingly, the association between adaptive regulation of positive emotion and general well being is being recognised (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and interest in strategies that individuals employ to regulate positive emotion has steadily grown.

Individuals deploy a range of strategies to modulate the magnitude of both negative and positive emotion (John & Gross, 2007). Both negatively- and positively valenced emotions can be upregulated (increased) or downregulated (decreased) (Gross, 1998). Upregulation or *savouring* involves attending to, enhancing or prolonging the positive emotion in order to maximize its effect (Bryant, Chadwick, & Kluwe, 2011), whilst down regulation, or *dampening* involves limiting or reducing the effect of a positive emotion through a variety of means such as suppression, or changing focus away from the positive emotion (Parrott, 1993; Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010). As would be expected, appropriate savouring of positive emotion has been associated with psychological resilience (e.g., Folkman, 2008), whereas dysfunctional regulation of positive emotion has been

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associated with poor mental health outcomes. For example, a failure to appropriately dampen positive emotion has been associated with the manic phase of bi-polar disorder (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011).

The regulation of emotion is central to attachment theory and the influence of individual differences in attachment style on ER has been extensively demonstrated in a number of studies (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Gentzler, Kerns, & Keener, 2010; Goodall, Trejnowska, & Darling, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These studies demonstrate that securely attached individuals integrate cognitive and affective resources to enable adaptive and flexible responses to emotions, whilst insecurely attached individuals employ maladaptive strategies (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Pascuzzo, Cyr, & Moss, 2012). Two orthogonal dimensions of attachment insecurity have been identified: avoidance and anxiety. Both of these are associated with ER patterns that serve the underlying goals and representations associated with that dimension (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The avoidance dimension, which is characterized by compulsive self-reliance, a desire to appear invulnerable and discomfort with interpersonal dependency, has been associated with a preferential use of suppression to regulate emotions (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This hypoactivation strategy results in low activation of the attachment system and prevents others from learning about the individual's internal emotional states (Caldwell & Shaver, 2013; Vrticka, Sander, & Vuilleumier, 2012).

The anxiety dimension has been associated with a poor self concept and exaggerated sense of vulnerability as well as continual fears of rejection or abandonment by others, a (e.g., Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). The ER strategy most commonly associated with the anxiety dimension is reappraisal, but in a negative direction (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Instead of decreasing negative emotion, individuals high on anxiety tend to exaggerate negative emotion responses. Anxiety is also associated with hypervigilance towards threat and a tendency towards negative rumination (Gentzler et al., 2010; Lanciano, Curci, Kafetsios, Vanda, & Zammuner, 2012).

In summary, attachment anxiety and avoidance have been independently associated with divergent ER strategies in response to negative emotions. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that attachment-related differences exist in some aspects of positive emotional experience, for example, insecurely attached individuals report feeling positive emotion less often than securely attached individuals (Shiota et al., 2006; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007) and individuals with high levels of avoidance demonstrate less positive emotions when exposed to positive stimuli (Magai, Hunziker, Mesias, & Culver, 2000; Spangler & Zimmermann, 1999). It is a logical progression to assume that attachment-related differences in the regulation of positive emotion will exist, however it is not necessarily logical to assume that regulatory processes operate in the same way for positive and negative emotions thus more detailed investigation is warranted.

## 1.2. Purpose

Based on the assumption that attachment representations are relatively stable across the lifespan, it can be assumed that

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations among main variables ( $n = 174$ ).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Savouring	11.85	6.17	1				
2. Dampening	2.99	3.16	-.10	1			
3. Anxiety	3.16	1.07	-.16*	.38**	1		
4. Avoidance	3.0	0.94	-.43**	.33**	.58**	1	
5. Self esteem	19.67	4.70	.21*	-.32**	-.57**	-.44**	1

\*  $p < 0.05$  level.

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  level.

attachment-related differences in ER are likely to be habitual (Picardi, Caroppo, Toni, Bitetti, & Di Maria, 2005). With this in mind, the present study focused on investigating the relationship between self-reported dispositional attachment and regulation of positive emotion. The study also included self esteem as a potential moderating variable as converging evidence demonstrates a robust relationship between low self esteem and attachment insecurity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Furthermore, at least one study has demonstrated that high self esteem individuals are more likely to savour positive emotion, whilst low self esteem is positively associated with dampening, possibly because positive emotion causes low self esteem individuals to feel anxious (Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). Gender was also included as a potential moderator as previous research has demonstrated gender differences in ER (McRae, Ochsner, Mauss, Gabrieli, & Gross, 2008).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate (1) how attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are associated with dampening and savouring in relation to positive emotion; (2) whether any moderating effects of self esteem or gender exist. As stated previously one cannot assume that individuals will apply the same regulatory processes to positive emotion that they habitually apply to the regulation of negative emotion. It is difficult therefore to make specific predictions related to either dimension of attachment insecurity, thus it was simply hypothesized that both dimensions of attachment insecurity would be independently associated with maladaptive regulation of positive emotion.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Prospective participants were contacted via the Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh email system and via social networking sites. A link to an online survey site hosted by the Bristol Online Survey was provided and participants were self-selecting. The survey opened with an information sheet; participants signaled consent by clicking onto the next page. Ethical approval was granted by the University. 221 participants completed the survey; 47 questionnaires were incomplete and were subsequently removed from the analysis, leaving a total of 174 participants (30 males; 144 females). The mean age was 32 years ( $SD = 12$ ; age range = 18–73 years).

### 2.2. Materials

The survey comprised three standardized questionnaires measuring adult attachment, global self esteem and the regulation of positive emotion:

**Table 2**  
Moderated moderation analysis predicting dampening from anxiety, self esteem and gender.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.66 [2.18, 3.14]	0.24	10.93	<.001
Anxiety	0.87 [.33, 1.40]	0.27	3.19	.002
Self esteem	-.10 [-.22, .02]	0.06	-1.58	.12
Gender	0.29 [-1.11, 1.69]	0.71	0.41	.68
Anxiety × self esteem	-.10 [-0.19, -0.01]	0.05	-2.14	.03
Anxiety × gender	1.89 [-0.00, 3.79]	0.96	1.97	.51
Self esteem × gender	0.19 [-0.12, 0.49]	0.16	1.21	.23
Anxiety × self esteem × gender	-.08 [-0.17, 0.35]	0.13	-0.65	.51

$R^2 = .23$  ( $p < .001$ ).

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