



## Expressive flexibility: Enhancement and suppression abilities differentially predict life satisfaction and psychopathology symptoms



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to examine whether expressive flexibility (i.e., enhancement and suppression abilities) are associated with reduced psychopathology and increased life satisfaction. A total of 310 Chinese college participants completed the Chinese version of Flexible Regulation of Emotional Expression (FREE) Scale together with a battery of scales assessing emotion regulation frequency, resilience, depression, anxiety and life satisfaction. Psychometric properties of the Chinese version of FREE were adequate. When controlling for demographics and emotion regulation frequency, higher suppression ability was associated with fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, while higher enhancement ability was predictive of higher life satisfaction. Moreover, consistent with the flexibility construct, enhancement ability predicted an increase in life satisfaction only when suppression ability was also high. Together, these results suggest that expressive flexibility incrementally accounts for mental health over emotion regulation frequency, and that the enhancement and suppression abilities are responsible for different dimensions of mental health. Clinical implications and future work on expressive flexibility are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Individual differences in emotion regulation (ER) frequency are transdiagnostic factors accounting for both psychopathology and well-being (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Gross & John, 2003). Considerable evidence has linked the frequent use of certain ER strategies to mental health (Aldao et al., 2010; Gross & John, 2003; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). In these investigations, reappraisal is assumed to be generally adaptive whereas suppression and rumination are regarded as putatively maladaptive strategies. More recent research, however, has highlighted the importance of flexibility in emotion regulation, taking into account both the regulatory efforts and the context in which regulatory strategies are implemented (Aldao, Sheppes, & Gross, 2015; Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

These models of flexibility were in part informed by research on expressive flexibility (EF), namely the ability to enhance and suppress one's displayed emotions in accord with situational demands (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004; Gupta & Bonanno, 2011; Westphal, Seivert, & Bonanno, 2010). There are two forms of regulatory abilities within the framework of EF: enhancement and suppression abilities. Whereas enhancement ability refers to showing increased

outward signs of emotional reactivity to meet the needs of a given context such as when friends share their happiness or sorrow, suppression ability conversely relates to a relative reduction in emotional expression in relevant context such as when a colleague makes an amusing but embarrassing error in a slideshow presentation. EF refers to the ability to both enhance and suppress emotions. Previous experimental findings indicate that EF predicts lower levels of psychopathology symptoms (Bonanno et al., 2004; Rodin et al., 2017; Southward & Cheavens, 2017) and better psychological adjustment (Westphal et al., 2010).

Burton and Bonanno (2016) developed a questionnaire measure of EF, the Flexible Regulation of Emotional Expression (FREE) Scale that examines the perceived ability to enhance or suppress emotional expression in an array of hypothetical social situations. The FREE scale measures four dimensions of expressive ability, respectively enhancement of positive emotion, enhancement of negative emotion, suppression of positive emotion, and suppression of negative emotion. There are also two second-order factors, respectively suppression and enhancement abilities.

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### 1.1. Emotion regulation frequency (ER) versus ability (EF)

Emotion regulation frequency and ability have been conceptualized as distinct constructs (Aldao et al., 2015; Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Whereas ER captures self-reported frequencies of use of certain emotion regulation strategies (Aldao et al., 2010), EF reflects the ability to modulate emotional expressions according to the context (Bonanno et al., 2004; Burton & Bonanno, 2016). For instance, suppression frequency refers to the overall tendency to suppress one's emotional expressions regardless of situations, whereas suppression ability refers to the capacity to suppress emotional expressions to meet situational demands. Despite theoretical considerations, empirical evidence is limited when it comes to whether EF and ER frequency account for unique or overlapping variances in psychological health. This is an important question with implications for both clarifying these two constructs and informing intervention efforts.

### 1.2. The relative importance of expressive enhancement and suppression abilities

Several studies have now demonstrated that EF, rather than only one form of ability (i.e., enhancement or suppression), predicts improved adjustment across time (Bonanno et al., 2004; Westphal et al., 2010). To date, however, evidence remains mixed regarding the relative importance of enhancement and suppression abilities. Whereas some research found that suppression ability is more predictive for depressive symptoms (Burton & Bonanno, 2016) and better psychological adjustment following negative life events (Westphal et al., 2010), other findings suggest that enhancement ability is equally important (Bonanno et al., 2004; Gupta & Bonanno, 2011), or even more important than suppression ability (Rodin et al., 2017). One possible yet unexamined explanation for these mixed findings is that suppression and enhancement abilities might differ in their relationships with different dimensions of psychological health. Suppression ability requires individuals to execute response inhibition, failure in which has been identified as a risk factor for depression and anxiety (Harvey et al., 2004; Parcheco-Unguetti, Acosta, Lupiáñez, Román, & Derakshan, 2012). By contrast, enhancement ability only requires individuals to display existing emotional expressions in a more obvious way. Enhancing one's emotional expression in the right context may promote relationships, thus improving life satisfaction (Guzman, Jurado, & Juson, 2014).

### 1.3. The present study

There is no direct evidence as regards to whether EF and ER frequency account for unique or overlapping variances in mental health. The present study addressed this issue by testing whether EF could predict both negative and positive mental health states independently of ER frequency. To this end, depression and anxiety were measured to represent psychopathology symptoms, and life satisfaction was assessed to reflect psychological well-being (Headey, Kelley, & Wearing, 1993). In addition, given the inconsistency in previous studies about the relative importance of enhancement and suppression, we investigated whether enhancement and suppression abilities are differentially associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety and with life satisfaction. Research on the EF construct suggested that higher scores in both enhancement and suppression rather than one form of abilities are more predictive for psychological adjustment (Bonanno et al., 2004; Westphal et al., 2010), question may then arise as to whether enhancement and suppression abilities have multiplicative effect or simply additive effect. To clarify this point, we further tested the interaction of enhancement and suppression. Prior to hypothesis testing, we examined whether the factor structure and reliability of the Flexible Regulation of Emotional Expression (FREE) scale are suitable to a Chinese sample.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Three hundred and ten (310) undergraduate students participated in this study through an online survey system for either course credits or monetary compensation (ten RMB). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Tsinghua University, China. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 ( $M = 20.03$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), and 47.1% of the sample were female. Participants provided informed consent prior to beginning the survey. The questionnaire package consisted of the Chinese version of FREE Scale together with a battery of measures assessing ER, psychopathology symptoms, and life satisfaction.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Expressive regulation ability

The ability to modulate emotional expression was measured by the FREE scale (Burton & Bonanno, 2016). The items were translated into Chinese by two graduate level bilingual psychology students, revised for several times, and then back-translated into English. The research team developing the FREE scale agreed that the back translation reflected the original meanings of the scale. The FREE scale consists of four subscales measuring the abilities to enhance positive emotion ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ), to enhance negative emotion ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), to suppress positive emotion ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ), and to suppress negative emotion ( $\alpha = 0.64$ ), each of which has four items for a total of 16 items. There are also two second-order factors, respectively the **enhancement** ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) and **suppression** ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) abilities. Participants rated how well they could either “be even more expressive than usual of how you were feeling” or “conceal how you were feeling” in a given scenario (e.g., “A friend wins an award for a sport that doesn't interest you”) on a 6-point scale (1 = *unable*, 6 = *very able*). Following guidelines by Burton and Bonanno (2016), we calculated: 1) a sum score by adding enhancement and suppression scores together, and 2) a polarity score by getting the absolute value of the difference between enhancement and suppression. EF was calculated by subtracting the polarity score from the sum score. As a result, the FREE scale has three scores: enhancement ability, suppression ability, and EF. Higher scores indicate greater flexibility in regulating emotional expressions.

#### 2.2.2. Resilience

**Resilience** was measured using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Chinese version translated by Yu & Zhang, 2007), a 25-item scale in which participants rated how they have felt during the past month on a scale of 0 (*not true at all*) to 4 (*nearly all of the time*) to a number of statements (e.g., “Able to adapt to change”). Scores of all items were summed to reflect resilience. Internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

#### 2.2.3. Emotion regulation frequency

We measured the habitual use of three of the most frequently applied strategies: reappraisal, suppression and rumination. **Reappraisal and suppression** were measured by the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003; Chinese version translated by Wang, Liu, Li, & Du, 2007), a 10-item scale assessing the use frequencies of reappraisal and suppression strategies. Participants rated the extent to which they agree with items such as “When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency was good for reappraisal ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) and adequate for suppression ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ). **Rumination** was measured by the Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003; Chinese version translated by Yang, Ling, Xiao, & Yao, 2009), a 22-item scale in which participants rated their tendency

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