



Emotion suppression and food intake in the context of a couple discussion: A dyadic analysis



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ABSTRACT

Using dyadic analysis, this study examined whether emotion suppression is a valid mediator in the relationship between mood change following a stressful couple discussion and subsequent food intake among cohabiting couples. In a laboratory setting, 80 heterosexual couples were presented with a bogus taste test immediately after discussing aspects that they would like each other to change. Mood change, emotion suppression and appetite perceptions were self-reported using visual analogue scales, and BMI was calculated based on objective measures. The moderated-mediation Actor-Partner Interdependence Model revealed a significant indirect conditional effect, showing that mood worsening was significantly associated with higher emotion suppression and that emotion suppression was significantly associated with more food intake among spouses with a high BMI. For spouses with a low BMI, the reverse effect was found, i.e., mood worsening was significantly associated with less food intake through the indirect effect of emotion suppression. Furthermore, an indirect partner effect was observed regardless of BMI, i.e., mood worsening was related to more food intake, which was mediated by the partner's emotion suppression. These results highlight the key role of emotion suppression in the relationship between mood change and food intake in the context of a stressful couple discussion.

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1. Introduction

Emotion-induced eating has been extensively studied in past decades. The relationship between negative emotions and eating has been shown to be complex as different variables, such as emotion intensity and individual characteristics, can intervene in this relationship (Macht, 2008). More recently, scholars have been interested in defining processes linking emotion to food intake. They propose that the way people regulate their emotions might mediate this relationship. Among emotion regulation strategies, emotion suppression has been identified as a key variable in emotion-induced eating (Svaldi, Tuschén-Caffier, Lackner, Zimmermann, & Naumann, 2012; Whiteside et al., 2007). Some findings even suggest that emotion suppression would be a better

predictor of food intake than emotion *per se* (Evers, Marijn Stok, & de Ridder, 2010). The goal of the present study was to examine the mediating role of emotion suppression in the relationship between mood change and eating in the context of romantic relationships.

1.1. Emotion suppression and food intake

Emotion suppression is defined as inhibiting emotion expression while being emotionally aroused in order to hide the emotional state from others (Gross, 1998). This strategy emphasizes controlling one's behavioral responses to an emotional event (Gross & John, 2003). Since emotion suppression is an effortful process, behavioral consequences have been associated with this emotion regulation strategy, such as cigarette consumption and alcohol use (Dvorak et al., 2014; Fucito, Juliano, & Toll, 2010).

The impact of emotion suppression on food intake has also been examined. In a laboratory setting, Evers et al. (2010) asked 62 young women to either suppress, reappraise or react spontaneously to (control condition) their emotions while watching a brutal and violent scene of a film. The results showed that emotion suppression was associated with greater food intake after watching the film compared to the other two conditions regardless of the emotions

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the women experienced. The authors concluded that food intake may be more related to emotion regulation than the experienced negative emotions *per se* (Evers et al., 2010).

Similar studies have been conducted among overweight women suffering from binge eating disorder (BED; Dingemans, Martijn, Jansen, & van Furth, 2009; Svaldi, Tuschen-Caffier, Trentowska, Caffier, & Naumann, 2014). Svaldi et al. (2014) compared the food intake of overweight women with and without BED who were instructed to either suppress or reappraise their emotions while watching a sad movie. As in the study by Evers et al. (2010), these authors observed greater food intake in women who were instructed to suppress their emotions than in those who reappraised them. No difference was observed between overweight women with and without BED. These results suggest that the disinhibiting effect of emotion suppression on eating is not specific to eating disorders.

To understand how emotion suppression can lead to disinhibited eating, the resource depletion model provides an interesting theoretical framework (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). This model stipulates that individuals have a limited amount of self-control resources since self-control is an effortful process. Thus, engaging in a task requiring self-control such as emotion suppression may impede performance on a subsequent task that also requires self-control resources, such as regulating eating behaviors (Loth et al., 2016).

1.2. Emotion suppression, romantic relationships and eating

The association between emotion suppression and eating has been studied once in the context of romantic relationships. In a 7-day diary study, Butler, Young, and Randall (2010) assessed emotion suppression, positive and negative feelings about one's partner, and eating behavior among a sample of 91 heterosexual couples. In women, an association was found between emotion suppression and food intake. This association was moderated by BMI (self-report). In fact, on days when they reported high levels of emotion suppression, overweight/obese women ate more than usual, while such an association was not observed in non-overweight/non-obese women. However, no association was found between the emotions experienced within the relationship, emotion suppression and eating in men (Butler et al., 2010). The results also showed a dyadic effect. On days when obese women reported high levels of emotion suppression, their spouse reported fewer negative feelings towards them. Conversely, in non-overweight/non-obese women who suppressed their emotions, their spouse experienced more negative feelings towards them (Butler et al., 2010). Thus, Butler and colleagues concluded that overweight/obese women were caught in a double bind since they seemed to be reinforced by their partner to use emotion suppression, but this strategy increased their risk of overeating.

These results came from data collected in real-life contexts (7-day daily diary completed at home), which certainly strengthened the ecological validity of the study. Nevertheless, considering the study design, it is possible that for some couples, few or no situations arousing negative emotions between spouses could have taken place during the week under study. Furthermore, all data (e.g., food intake, anthropometric measures) were self-reported, which can be prone to significant bias (recall bias, underestimation, etc.; Mogre, Aleyira, & Nyaba, 2015; Niedhammer, Bugel, Bonenfant, Goldberg, & Leclerc, 2000; Schoeller, 1990).

The aim of the present study was to examine in a laboratory setting whether emotion suppression mediates the association between mood change after an induced stressful couple discussion and subsequent food intake in men and women according to their BMI. Given the possible dyadic effect between two spouses, the

inter-influence of partners was examined using a dyadic model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Considering the results obtained by Butler et al. (2010), we hypothesized that mood worsening related to emotion suppression would lead to more food intake in overweight/obese women. In men, we assumed that there would be no association between mood, emotion suppression and food intake regardless of BMI. Finally, a dyadic effect was expected. In couples where the woman was overweight/obese, mood worsening of the spouse (man) was expected to be associated with emotion suppression of the woman and hence greater subsequent food intake.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Eighty heterosexual couples were recruited through email lists from Laval University as well as from a list of research volunteers from the general community of Quebec City. Prior to participation, volunteers were briefly screened to ensure that they met the following inclusion criteria: 1) aged 18 years or older, 2) cohabiting with their partner for at least six months, 3) not suffering from food allergies related to items presented during the taste test, and 4) not suffering from diabetes. No exclusion criteria based on eating habits or difficulties were applied in order to ensure the variability of the sample in terms of weight and eating profile.

The women were between 18 and 73 years old ($M = 31.35$, $SD = 13.69$) and were mostly Caucasian (91%). Fifty-eight percent had obtained a university degree, and 42% had obtained a college degree (i.e., pre-university or technical education). The women's BMI (kg/m^2) ranged from 17.3 to 43.9 ($M = 24.24$, $SD = 4.32$). The men were between 19 and 74 years old ($M = 33.78$, $SD = 14.14$) and were also mostly Caucasian (93%). Fifty-three percent had obtained a university degree, 30% a college degree, and 17% a high-school degree. The men's BMI ranged from 15.9 to 38.6 ($M = 24.97$, $SD = 4.13$). Seventy-five percent of couples were in common law relationships (i.e., cohabitation without a marriage license), while 25% were married. Twenty-seven percent of women reported having children compared to 29% of men. Relationship duration ranged from nine months to 53 years ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 10.15$). The median annual household income reported by spouses was \$20,000 to \$39,999 per year, which was slightly below the average wage in Quebec probably because of the high proportion of students in our sample.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were blind to the true purpose of the study. They were informed that the objective of the study was to assess the impact of dyadic stress on food taste. They were unaware that their food intake would be measured (*bogus taste test*; Polivy, Herman, & Mcfarlane, 1994). Participants were instructed to refrain from eating 2 h prior to the appointment.

Upon arrival, participants signed an informed consent. Spouses were split into two different rooms where they completed visual analogue scales (VAS) to rate their mood. Thereafter, they wrote a list of at least one aspect of their partner's behavior or attitude that they would have liked for him/her to change. They were instructed to write issues that were specific and respectfully framed (i.e., no name-calling or insults but rather a report of specific observations about attitudes or behaviors such as "I do not appreciate when you talk about my family members behind their backs" and "I would like you to help me more with the chores"; inspired by Van den Broucke, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 1995). Participants took, on average, 5 min to draft the list and were given more time if needed. Next, spouses were brought into the same room. They

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