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The relations between interpersonal self-support traits and emotion regulation strategies: A longitudinal study[☆]



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Although several cross-sectional surveys have shown that certain traits such as extraversion and neuroticism are related to emotion regulation, few studies have explored the nature of this relationship. The present study tried to explore the longitudinal relation between traits and emotion regulation strategies. The Interpersonal Self-Support Scale for Middle School Students (ISSS-MSS) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) were administered to 374 middle school students two times across a 6-month interval. A path analysis via structural equation modeling of the five interpersonal self-support traits and the two emotion regulation strategies was tested. The results showed that interpersonal independence predicted expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal, and that interpersonal initiative also predicted reappraisal, while reappraisal predicted interpersonal flexibility and interpersonal openness 6 month later. These results support the hypotheses that some personality traits influence certain emotion regulation strategies, while other traits may be influenced by specific emotion regulation strategies.

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Introduction

The relationship between personality and emotion regulation (ER) has been focused on recently. For example, extraversion is thought to be related to adaptive emotion regulation strategies, while neuroticism is believed to be related to negative emotion regulation strategies (John & Gross, 2004; Ng & Diener, 2009). Numerous studies have suggested that emotion regulation is influenced by temperament and personality (Cassidy, 1994; Jaffe, Gullone, & Hughes, 2010; John & Gross, 2004; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). Research on temperament has implied that genetic factors play an important role in emotional reactions and emotion regulation, and early temperamental characteristics may make it easy or difficult for children to learn and develop special kinds of emotion regulation skills and strategies (John & Gross, 2004). For example, temperamental variables were found to be associated with emotion regulation one year later among 8–11 years old

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preadolescents (Zalewski, Lengua, Wilson, Trancik, & Bazinet, 2011). With individual development, temperament becomes the core component of personality (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000). Thus, instead of temperament, personality begins to affect the features and development of emotion regulation strategies (John & Gross, 2004; John & Srivastava, 1999). For example, a longitudinal investigation in adults (Kokkonen & Pulkkinen, 2001) revealed that neuroticism and extraversion (both estimated by two different measures at age 27 and at age 33, respectively) predicted the use of emotion regulation strategies such as repair and emotional ambivalence at age 36. In addition, emotion regulation was thought to impact the development of personality. For example, emotion regulation was believed to facilitate the flexibility, maintain the integrity of and increase the overall functioning of the personality system (Koole, 2009). Personality systems interactions theory (Kuhl, 2000) suggests that emotion regulation improves personality functioning. However, as far as we know, few empirical studies have supported the hypothesis that emotion regulation affects personality traits. Thus there may be three possible relations between personality and emotion regulation. First, personality influences emotion regulation, but emotion regulation does not influence personality. Second, some personality factors influence certain strategies of emotion regulation and some emotion regulation strategies influence other specific personality factors. Third, the relationship between personality and emotion regulation is mutual.

However, to our knowledge, most current studies have used cross-sectional or experimental methods, which make it difficult to test the three hypotheses with respect to the relationship between personality and emotion regulation. The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the three possible relations between personality and emotion regulation using longitudinal data.

There are many strategies that people may use to regulate their emotions. Two common forms of emotion regulation defined by a general process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2001, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004) were the focus of the present study. The process-oriented model (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004) defined emotion regulation as the processes through which people recognize and change their experience and expression of emotions (Gross, 1998). According to this framework, emotion may be regulated at each of the several stages during the emotion-generation process, and the emotion-generation process can be categorized as two basic stages of antecedent and response. The antecedent stage of emotion generation occurs relatively early in the emotion-generation process and refers to the cognitive processing of emotion-related information. The response stage occurs relatively late in the emotion-generation process and refers to the experiential, behavioral and physiological responses to emotional stimulators. Accordingly, emotion regulation strategies can be divided into antecedent-focused strategies (which adjust emotional responding before the emotional response tendencies have been wholly triggered) and response-focused strategies (which interfere with emotional behaviors after the emotional response tendencies have already been produced) or cognitive regulation (e.g., reappraisal) and behavioral regulation (e.g., suppression). Two commonly used emotion regulation strategies (Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression) were the focus of the process model, numerous researchers and the current study. Cognitive Reappraisal is a typically antecedent-focused strategy and refers to changing emotional impact by redefining potentially emotion-eliciting events (Lazarus & Alfert, 1964). For example, one may view a final exam as a chance to find out that past study was insufficient rather than as a risk of failure and thereby decrease test anxiety. In contrast, Expressive Suppression is a typically response-focused strategy and involves suppressing the ongoing expressive behavior associated with emotional experience (Gross & Levenson, 1993). For example, although a salesman may feel angry with customers, he still retains a smile on his face.

Several prior cross-sectional studies (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Hasking et al., 2010; Wang, Shi, & Li, 2009) have revealed that personality traits are associated with cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression even in a Chinese sample. For example, a study of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 found that extraversion and openness were associated with cognitive reappraisal, neuroticism was positively related to expressive suppression, and extraversion and agreeableness were inversely related to expressive suppression (Gresham & Gullone, 2012). However, to our knowledge, few studies have examined the longitudinal relations between personality traits and cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Consequently, the current study tried to explore the relations between personality and cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression using longitudinal data set in middle school students.

An indigenous Chinese personality construct was used as the personality variable of interest in the present study because it was believed to be associated with cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression and may be more suitable for Chinese people. It may be beneficial to expand our knowledge with respect to the relationship between personality and emotion regulation beyond personality factors derived from Western culture. This personality construct is called interpersonal self-support (ISS). ISS is an integrated personality factor including a set of five traits that could help individuals solve interpersonal problems in daily life and facilitate their social development (Xia, 2010; Xia, Shi, Zhang, & Hollon, 2013). The five ISS traits are *interpersonal independence* (the tendency and ability to deal with interpersonal activity or problems independently), *interpersonal initiative* (the tendency to initiate affiliations with other individuals), *interpersonal responsibility* (the tendency to be faithful and truthful to others), *interpersonal flexibility* (the tendency to deal with interpersonal events contingently and flexibly), and *interpersonal openness* (the tendency to accept other individuals positively).

Personality development is dependent on the social environment in which people live. Social behavior, cognition, and emotion all are the important components of personality. Assessing personality traits within the context of interpersonal interaction could reveal the disposition and patterns of social behaviors and is useful for personality and social psychology research. In fact, some important traits such as extraversion and agreeableness focus on social interaction and reflect adaptations of individual to social environment. Chinese culture emphasizes interpersonal relationships and interpersonal communication. Thus, the ISS focused on the dispositions and characters in interpersonal domain.

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