THE SITUATIONAL TEST OF EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY: THE EXPERT´S CONSENSUS ON THE EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGY EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

The ability to effectively regulate emotions has emerged as an important protective factor for mental health. Current research provides insights into the maladaptive/adaptive nature of the selected emotion regulation strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, suppression of emotion expression). The ambiguity of these findings suggests a protective factor of mental health may be an individual's ability to flexibly use different emotion regulation strategies depending on the situation evoking this emotion. However, measuring the flexibility of emotion regulation strategies is problematic due to the lack of measurements. The Situational Test of Emotional Flexibility (STEF) was created by the authors of the study, containing twelve pairs of situation scenarios eliciting three negative emotions (fear, sadness, and anger). Each pair of scenarios takes place in the same situation, changing only one aspect of the situation (e.g., the presence of other people). Participants are asked to consider six emotion regulation strategy effectiveness (acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, rumination, expression of emotion, ignoring, self-compassion) to regulate the evoked emotion for each scenario. STEF allows the assessment of the emotion regulation strategy flexibility in each scenario and also the assessment of the preferred emotion regulation strategy. This paper presents the results of an expert consensus on the effectiveness of six emotion regulation strategies via 24 scenarios. The research sample consisted of 19 experts (4 psychotherapists, 10 counselling/school psychologists, and 5 clinical psychologists) requiring at least five years of practice (M = 11.4 years) who assessed the effectiveness of using six emotion regulation strategies in 24 scenarios evoking fear, sadness, and anger. The results show that from the experts' perspective, self-compassion, expression of emotion, and cognitive reappraisal were the most effective emotion regulation strategies for all negative emotions. Ignoring emotion and rumination were the least effective strategies for all of them. The rank order of the effectiveness of the strategies showed slight differences separately for each emotion: anger, sadness, and fear. We discuss the results regarding the adaptive nature of emotion regulation strategies.

Keywords: *Flexibility, emotion regulation strategies, measurement, expert assessment.*

1. Introduction

Emotions are fundamental to human experience and behaviour, influencing mental health, thinking processes, and social interactions. Therefore, understanding how to regulate emotions effectively is essential for individuals to cope with various life situations. Over the past two decades, research has shown that difficulties in emotion regulation (ER) are central to developing and maintaining well-being and psychopathology (e.g., Kraiss et al., 2020). Gross' (1999) process model of ER stands out as a highly influential conceptual framework. This model comprehensively defines ER as a set of strategies individuals use to increase, maintain, or decrease their affective experience, including the feelings, behaviours, or physiological responses that make up a given emotion (Gross, 1999).

So far, a wider range of ER strategies have been identified, and researchers have sought to validate their adaptive capacity. For example, the adaptive impact of cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, and self-compassion has been demonstrated in clinical psychology. On the other hand, rumination, suppression, and avoidance are maladaptive RE strategies (e.g., Aldao et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2017; Dietrich et al., 2014). Challenges to the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies have emerged with introducing the concepts of ER flexibility. In this context, maladaptive strategies are characterized by rigid utilization or strategies hindering goal achievement (Aldao et al.,

2015). However, measuring the flexibility of emotion regulation strategies is problematic due to the lack of measurements.

The study authors have created the Situational Test of Emotional Flexibility (STEF), which contains situation scenarios eliciting three negative emotions (fear, sadness, and anger) to measure ER flexibility. In this paper, we present the first results from the initial phase of STEF creation. We aimed to investigate how experts judge the effectiveness of six RE strategies (acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, rumination, expression of emotion, ignoring, and self-compassion) in scenarios evoking negative emotions.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The research sample consisted of 19 experts (4 psychotherapists, 10 counselling/school psychologists, and 5 clinical psychologists) with minimum five years of practice (M = 11.4 years). 15 of the experts were female. A convenience sampling procedure combined with the snowball sampling method was used to select the research sample.

2.2. Measurements

The Situational Test of Emotional Flexibility (STEF) was used to assess the effectiveness of six ER strategies being developed and validated by the study authors. The first version of the STEF consisted of 12 pairs of scenarios (24 scenarios in total). Scenarios were used to evoke three negative emotions (four for each emotion of fear, sadness and anger). The pairs of scenarios have the same content but differ in the context in which they are set (e.g., the presence of another person). One example of two scenarios (scenarios 1 and 13) differs as follows: "You're driving in the rain, and you get a flat tyre. Even though you have the tools to change the wheel, something gets stuck, and you can't do it. You're already frustrated and angry when a car pulls up next to you. ***Your old friend*** *(scenario 1)* ***/ Two policemen*** *(scenario 13)* get out, asking what happened. What will you do with your emotion at that moment?". Experts judged the effectiveness of RE strategies on a 4-point scale (0 = ineffective, 3 = very effective). The following six RE strategies were considered and were the same for each scenario: a) I accept my emotion and have no need to change it *(acceptation)*; b) I decide to see the situation from a broader perspective *(cognitive reappraisal)*; c) I think over and over about my emotion and its causes *(rumination)*; d) I openly express my emotion. (express it) *(expression of emotion)*; e) I ignore my emotion (push it out) *(ignoring)*; f) I have a kind understanding of my emotion *(self-compassion)*. The summary score for each RE strategy was calculated as the average of the effectiveness across all 24 scenarios (or for the corresponding eight scenarios when considering the effectiveness of each negative emotion).

2.3. Statistical analysis

Data were analysed using the ANOVA test for repeated measures using the statistical software SPSS ver. 19. Prior to analysis, the normality of the data distribution was assessed, and the sphericity of the data was verified using Mauchly's test of sphericity. Post-hoc comparisons were analysed using Bonferroni confidence interval adjustment.

3. Results

Analysis of variance for repeated measures found significant differences in the sum effectiveness of six RE strategies with a large effect size ($F_{(5, 90)} = 27.134$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .601$). Experts rated self-compassion, expression, and cognitive reappraisal as the most effective, and the difference between them was not statistically significant. Acceptance was judged to be less effective compared to self-compassion ($p < .01$) but more effective compared to rumination ($p < .01$) and ignoring ($p < .01$). Rumination and ignoring were judged to be the least effective RE strategies compared to all other RE strategies ($p < .001$).

Next, we focused on comparing the effectiveness of each RE strategy for the three negative emotions. We found that acceptance ($F_{(1.338,24.082)} = 3.927$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .179$) and emotion expression ($F_{(2,36)} = 4.036$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .183$) were considered more effective for sadness than for fear. Self-compassion was also more effective for sadness than for both fear and anger ($F_{(1.449,26.081)} = 7.006$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .282$). On the other hand, ignoring the fear was considered more effective for fear than for sadness ($F_{(2,36)} = 5.017$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .218$). No significant differences of effectiveness in cognitive reappraisal ($F_{(1.426,25.661)} = 1.995$, $p > .05$) and rumination ($F_{(2,36)} = .874$, $p > .05$) were found (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of measured variables.

ER strategies	sum		anger		sadness		fear	
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
Acc	1,51	,68	1,50	,70	1,62	,73	1,42	,69
CogR	1,97	,51	2,02	,55	1,87	,59	2,02	,53
Rum	,73	,53	,72	,53	,71	,55	,77	,56
Exp	2,06	,41	1,99	,41	2,20	,43	2,00	,54
Ign	,67	,58	,68	,51	,54	,61	,80	,72
SelfC	2,29	,71	2,17	,77	2,43	,68	2,25	,73

Note: Acc – acceptance, CogR – cognitive reappraisal, Rum – rumination, Exp – expression of emotion, Ign – ignoring, SelfC – self-compassion, SD – standard deviation

4. Discussion

RE strategies are currently being investigated as a possible transdiagnostic construct predictive of psychopathology and well-being. Self-report questionnaires and scales, e.g., the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) are the most widely used ways of researching and measuring ER strategies, but they have several limitations. The authors of this study are currently developing the STEF, which is based on real-life scenarios to get closer to respondents´ experiences.

Our pilot study yielded that experts considered three RE strategies most effective across all scenarios - self-compassion, cognitive reappraisal, and expressing emotions. On the other hand, experts considered ignoring emotions and rumination to be the least effective. These findings are consistent with previous research using self-report questionnaires (e.g., Aldao et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2017; Dietrich et al., 2014). However, we also found that judgments of the effectiveness of some strategies varied in relation to the emotion evoked. This suggests that some RE strategies may be more or less adaptive, regardless of the context in which they are used, such as the cognitive reappraisal strategy and rumination. On the other hand, the effectiveness of emotion expression and acceptance may depend more on the specifics of the emotion evoked and the context.

The study's main limitations are a pilot application of the STEF, and a limited number of the experts used. Future research needs to be directed toward validating the STEF's psychometric properties and individual flexibility scores in ER strategies that opens up to the interest of foreign researchers, and later on to practitioners.

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