



Emotion regulation and academic underperformance: The role of school burnout[☆]



Gregory S. Seibert^{a,*}, Kristina N. Bauer^b, Ross W. May^a, Frank D. Fincham^a

^a Family Institute, 310 Longnere, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1491, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology, 3105 S. Dearborn Ave., Chicago, IL 60616, United States

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ABSTRACT

How students regulate emotions and the effects of emotion regulation (ER) on academic outcomes is gaining attention in educational psychology research. However, little is known about factors that explain their relationship and inform intervention. Two studies therefore examined the role of school burnout in explaining the relationship between ER strategies (reappraisal, suppression) and academic outcomes (GPA, absenteeism) among undergraduate students. Study 1 (N = 550) investigated ER strategies as antecedents to the effects of school burnout on academic outcomes. Significant indirect effects emerged to show that school burnout mediated the relationships between ER and GPA and absenteeism. Study 2 (N = 509) examined the temporal relationship between ER strategies, school burnout, GPA and absenteeism at two time points. Findings indicated that ER strategies preceded the effects of school burnout. School burnout, in turn, was identified as the mechanism linking (mediating) ER strategies to academic outcomes. Limitations, clinical applications, and future directions are outlined.

1. Introduction

It is evident that emotions play a critical role in motivation, self-regulated learning, and performance (Ahmed, van der Werf, Kuyper, & Minnaert, 2013; Burić & Sorić, 2012; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Not surprisingly, emotion has been identified as an important factor for numerous academic-related outcomes (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011; Pekrun & Schutz, 2007). Research is now beginning to elucidate how the regulation of emotions can influence academic-related outcomes (Burić, Sorić, & Penezić, 2016). Emotion regulation (ER), defined as processes in which emotional reactions are monitored, evaluated, and modified (Thompson, 1994), appears to be integral to academic success across all age groups (Burić et al., 2016). Recent research is extending these findings to gain a better understanding of the specific ER strategies students engage in, and how these strategies impact academic-related outcomes (e.g., Ben-Eliyahu & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013; Burić et al., 2016). The present studies further examine the relationship between specific ER strategies and academic-related outcomes and attempt to identify potential mechanisms that might explain their relationship.

One construct that can shed light on how ER strategies impact academic outcomes is school burnout. Derived from the occupational

burnout literature, school burnout is a deleterious consequence to mismanaged school-related stress and is characterized by cynicism toward the meaning of school, chronic exhaustion from school-related work, and a belief of inadequacy in school related accomplishment (Parker & Salmela-Aro, 2011; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela, 2008). Like ER, school burnout is also related to academic outcomes including lower grade point average (GPA), school dropout, and absenteeism (Fimian & Cross, 1986; Korhonen, Linnanmaki, & Aunio, 2014; Lewis & Frydenberg, 2004; May, Bauer, & Fincham, 2015; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008, 2009; Yang, 2004). Importantly, Seibert, May, Fitzgerald, and Fincham (2016) have shown that the relationship between school burnout and poorer academic outcomes was contingent upon degree of self-control capacity. Although ER has been linked to occupational burnout (see Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010; Chang, 2013), the relation between ER and school burnout, with the exception just mentioned, remains unexplored.

The conceptual links among ER, school burnout, and academic outcomes can be understood in terms of the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). More specifically, the process model, derived from the response-tendency perspective (Gross, 1998), posits that emotional responses and/or outcomes are a product of an individual's

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gss14@my.fsu.edu (G.S. Seibert), kbauer1@iit.edu (K.N. Bauer), rmay@fsu.edu (R.W. May), ffincham@fsu.edu (F.D. Fincham).

emotional response-tendencies (ER strategies) which are considered adaptive reactions to a preceding stressor (e.g., uncomfortable situation). From this perspective, and because school burnout is a consequence of school-related stress, the degree to which students experience burnout may depend on the ER strategy they use to regulate that stress. For example, whether a student utilizes an adaptive or maladaptive ER strategy to regulate school-related stress, may further influence whether they experience school burnout, which in turn, is likely to impact academic outcomes. This suggests that school burnout might serve as a mechanism accounting for the effects of ER strategies on academic outcomes.

Of specific interest are the relationships between different ER strategies (e.g., reappraisal, suppression) and academic outcomes that students may implement to help ameliorate the adverse emotional consequences of school-related stress. For example, reappraisal, defined as changing the way a situation is conceptualized can help to decrease the emotional impact of that situation/stressor (Gross, 2002). For instance, rather than focusing on potential mistakes in giving a presentation, an individual may conceptualize it as a learning experience in order to reduce his or her anxiety. Suppression, in contrast, is comprised of holding back outward signs of inner feelings and is thought to be maladaptive as it fails to lessen the emotional experience (Gross, 2002); fighting back tears after receiving a poor grade is an example of suppressing inner feelings.

ER used effectively (e.g., engaging in reappraisal) has been shown to improve physiological reactivity to acute stress (Jamieson, Mendes, & Nock, 2013) and decrease symptom severity in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Boden, Bonn-Miller, Kashdan, Alvarez, & Gross, 2012). Used ineffectively (e.g., engaging in suppression), ER has been associated with increased physical and depressive symptoms in response to occupational stress (Golkar et al., 2014; Jin-Kyoung, Jung-Im, & Do-Young, 2014). At a more general, trait-level context (as done in this current research) reappraisal is considered to be more adaptive while suppression is less adaptive (Ben-Eliyahu & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013). However, it is important to note that in certain contexts suppression can be beneficial (e.g., disliked classes, see Ben-Eliyahu & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013).

Accordingly, and informed by the process model of emotional regulation, the current study extends ER and school burnout literatures by examining their relationship to gain a clearer understanding of how school burnout might mediate the relationship between ER strategies and academic outcomes. Findings from the proposed study can inform clinicians and researchers alike regarding the role specific ER strategies play in ameliorating and/or worsening the deleterious effects of school burnout on academic outcomes.

2. Study 1

2.1. Introduction

To help advance our understanding of emotion regulation and its relationship to school burnout, we investigated the associations among emotion regulation strategies (reappraisal and suppression), school burnout, and academic outcomes (GPA and absenteeism). Given the tenets of the process model of emotion regulation, we hypothesized that emotion regulation will be indirectly associated with academic outcomes through school burnout. More specifically, because reappraisal tends to be more adaptive, it should be negatively related to school burnout, whereas suppression should be positively related to school burnout because it is less adaptive for managing stress. School burnout should subsequently be related to poorer school outcomes (i.e., decreased GPA and increased absenteeism). Due to the fact that the relationships between emotion regulation strategies, school burnout, and academic outcomes have been unexplored in the literature, we examined the possibility that school burnout might fully or partially mediate the association between ER and academic outcomes. Both the

School Burnout Inventory (SBI; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008, 2009) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS; Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002) were used to evaluate the consistency of the role played by school burnout in the emotional regulation-academic outcome association.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Participants

Five hundred and fifty undergraduate students (88.4% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.63$ years, $SD = 1.83$) from a major southeastern university in the United States participated in this study which was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The sample was comprised of 62.4% Caucasian, 13.1% Black, 16.7% Hispanic, and 3.3% endorsed other.

2.2.2. Measures

2.2.2.1. Emotion regulation. Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003, suppression: $\alpha = 0.81$, reappraisal: $\alpha = 0.86$). The 10 item ERQ measures two emotion regulation strategies, expressive suppression (four items) and cognitive reappraisal (six items). Composite expressive suppression is represented by summing questions 2, 4, 6, and 9, which includes items such as "I keep my emotions to myself" and "I control my emotions by not expressing them." Composite cognitive reappraisal is represented by summing questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10, which includes items such as "When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation" and "When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm."

2.2.2.2. School burnout. School burnout was assessed using the School Burnout Inventory (SBI; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008, 2009, $\alpha = 0.88$) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS; Schaufeli et al., 2002, $\alpha = 0.89$). The SBI consists of 9 items measuring three first-order factors of school burnout: (a) exhaustion at school (four items), (b) cynicism toward the meaning of school (three items), and (c) sense of inadequacy at school (two items). Example items include "I feel overwhelmed by my schoolwork", "I'm continually wondering whether my schoolwork has any meaning" and "I often have feelings of inadequacy in my schoolwork" for exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy, respectively. SBI items are scored on a 6-point Likert agreement rating scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). Higher scores on exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy represent greater school burnout. The MBI-SS consists of 15 items that constitute three scales: exhaustion (five items, $\alpha = 0.91$), cynicism (four items, $\alpha = 0.93$), and professional efficacy (six items, $\alpha = 0.89$). Items include "I feel emotionally drained by my studies", "I have become less enthusiastic about my studies", and "I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies" for exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy, respectively. MBI items are scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Higher scores on exhaustion and cynicism and low scores on efficacy are indicative of greater burnout. MBI efficacy scores were reversed coded for use in composite scores. For both the SBI and the MBI, summed scores form the first-order factors comprise a second-order overall school burnout score, with higher scores indicating greater school burnout.

2.2.2.3. Academic performance. Academic performance was measured using self-report of GPA. Major universities in the United States use a scale ranging from 0.0 to 4.0, which represents the total average of earned points accumulated by a student throughout their college career. A higher GPA is reflective of higher academic achievement.

2.2.2.4. Absenteeism. Absenteeism was measured using participants'

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