



Emotion dysregulation and interpersonal problems: The role of defensiveness



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ABSTRACT

Despite evidence that individual differences in defensiveness (typically measured with social desirability scales) may affect associations among self-report measures, little is known about the impact of defensiveness in the well-established relations between self-report emotion dysregulation and interpersonal problems. In Study 1 (community sample; $N = 274$), we found evidence that defensiveness significantly explained a portion of the shared variance between emotion dysregulation and interpersonal problems in the externalizing domain (i.e., interpersonal ambivalence, and aggression) but not in the internalizing domain. In Study 2, we replicated and extended these findings by showing that defensiveness accounted for a positive indirect effect of emotion dysregulation on aggression in a sample of incarcerated offenders ($N = 268$). These findings are consistent with an increasing amount of research corroborating that defensiveness reflects meaningful variance – rather than a statistical nuisance – in relationships between self-reported ratings of emotion dysregulation, interpersonal problems and aggression. In both samples, reports of lower levels of emotion dysregulation were associated with higher levels of defensiveness. In turn, individuals with higher levels of defensiveness were more likely to report lower levels of interpersonal ambivalence and aggression. Therefore, defensiveness may play an important role in the mechanisms linking emotion dysregulation and associated negative consequences.

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1. Introduction

Recent research has provided substantial evidence that difficulties in emotion regulation are related to several forms of psychopathology and other interpersonal difficulties (Gross & John, 2003; Kring & Sloan, 2009; Tamir, 2016). Because the study of emotion regulation has often relied largely on self-report measures, some limitations of self-report measures raise questions. One important construct that appears relevant to self-report measures of emotional functioning is defensiveness (i.e., the individual tendency to perceive and report primarily favorable attributes about oneself – as opposed to unfavorable ones; Lane, Merikangas, Schwartz, Huang, & Prusoff, 1990). Therefore, defensiveness may reflect distortion or avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and behavioral tendencies associated with a risk of social rejection or with a negative evaluation of the self (Uziel, 2010). Prior studies provide preliminary evidence that individual differences in defensiveness account

for some of the shared variance between indices of emotion regulation and criteria related to psychosocial functioning. However, only one prior study has employed modern statistical methods to address whether defensiveness truly accounts for indirect relationships between emotion regulation and an index of psychological functioning, sometimes described as atemporal mediation (Winer et al., 2016). Therefore, the current study was conducted to provide a direct test of whether defensiveness can account for an indirect relationship between self-reported emotion regulation and interpersonal functioning in two independent samples.

Emotion regulation refers to the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for the monitoring, evaluating, and modification of emotional experience and expression (Thompson, 1994), as well as to the ability to modulate behavior when experiencing intense emotional arousal (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Some researchers have also identified awareness of emotion as a component of emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Saarni, 1999; Thompson & Calkins, 1996), that is, a tendency to pay attention to and acknowledge emotional responses, even if upsetting (e.g., fear, sadness, or anger).

Regardless of different conceptualizations, the study of emotion regulation is relevant for understanding adaptive and maladaptive

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functioning (Kim, Ford, Mauss, & Tamir, 2015; Kring & Sloan, 2009). There is substantial evidence that good emotion regulation skills are associated with psychological well-being (Balzarotti, Biassoni, Villani, Prunas, & Velotti, 2016) and good interpersonal functioning (Gross & John, 2003; Tamir, 2016). Conversely, emotion dysregulation has been linked with a variety of interpersonal problems (Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Herr, Rosenthal, Geiger, & Erikson, 2013). For instance, the use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies like emotional suppression is associated with reduced sociability, as indexed by lower scores on indices of openness, agreeableness and extraversion (Gross & John, 2003). Further, emotion dysregulation has been associated with heightened interpersonal sensitivity and ambivalence (Besharat & Shahidi, 2014; Dixon-Gordon, Gratz, Breetz, & Tull, 2013), as well as with aggression and violent behavior (Donahue, Goranson, McClure, & Van Male, 2014; Garofalo, Holden, Zeigler-Hill, & Velotti, 2016; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2015; Velotti, Casselman, Garofalo, & McKenzie, 2017).

The growing number of studies on emotion dysregulation in recent years has been partly facilitated by the development of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), which allows assessment of perceived emotion regulation problems across multiple domains. In the DERS framework, emotion regulation is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving: the awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotions; the ability to control behavior and pursue desired goals under negative emotional arousal; and the ability to employ effective emotion regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Impairments in any of these domains are considered indicative of emotion dysregulation. In the last decade, ample evidence has accumulated corroborating the validity of the DERS as a self-report index of emotion dysregulation, and its use has advanced our understanding of the relations between emotion dysregulation and a variety of psychological and interpersonal problems (John & Eng, 2014).

The growth in research on emotion regulation has relied largely on self-report measures of emotion regulation ability and strategies (John & Eng, 2014). However, self-report indices of affective and cognitive functioning are characterized by limitations, and indices of emotion regulation are no exception. Scores on self-report measures of emotion regulation may be influenced by individual differences, such as those related to poor reading ability, memory/recall bias, a lack of reflectivity, and willful deception (Tull, Bornovalova, Patterson, Hopko, & Lejuez, 2008). Some of the limitations of self-report measures reflect their dependence on self-knowledge (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). In particular, the empirical literature consistently links individual differences in defensiveness to scores on a wide variety of self-report measures. As the construct of defensiveness is typically employed today, it is conceptualized as an individual differences dimension related to the tendency to fail to perceive and fail to report unfavorable attributes, and instead to perceive and report primarily favorable attributes about oneself (Lane et al., 1990). Therefore, defensiveness may reflect distortion or avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and behavioral tendencies associated with a risk of social rejection or with a negative evaluation of the self (Uziel, 2010).

Although the construct of defensiveness was first studied to identify individuals exhibiting response bias on self-report measures of personality (using measures of social desirability; e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), there is substantial evidence that defensiveness represents a meaningful dimension of personality rather than a response bias that limits the utility of self-report measures (Chung, 2012; Connelly & Chang, 2016; Kurtz, Tarquini, & Iobst, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1983; Uziel, 2010). For instance, it has been reported that socially desirable responding does not vary across administration conditions that differ in anonymity (e.g., paper-and-pencil versus internet surveys), as would be expected of a simple measure of response bias (Dodou & de Winter, 2014). Along the same lines, levels of agreement between self- and informant-report measures of personality and

psychopathology are not related to scores on social desirability scales (Kurtz et al., 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1983), indicating that the accuracy of self-reports is not influenced by individual differences in defensiveness. Thus, accumulating evidence seems to provide support for considering defensiveness a personality trait rather than merely a bias in self ratings of individual characteristics. However, different perspectives have been advanced regarding the nature of defensiveness as an individual differences construct, with several authors arguing that defensiveness captures a tendency to avoid acknowledging problems (i.e., weak self-knowledge), whereas others suggest that higher levels of defensiveness reflect greater levels of self-control and psychological health.

On the one hand, several studies have reported evidence that higher levels of defensiveness are associated with poorer health outcomes. For example, defensiveness has been linked to heightened blood pressure reactivity and poorer parasympathetic function (Movius & Allen, 2005; Nyklíček, Vingerhoets, Van Heck, & Van Limpt, 1998). In one study, defensiveness predicted a seven-fold increase in hypertension over a three-year period (Rutledge, Linden, & Davies, 2000). Although not all authors have replicated these relationships (e.g., Blackhart, Eckel, & Tice, 2007; Feldman, Lehrer, Hochron, & Schwartz, 2002), these findings seem to suggest that the negative relation between defensiveness and self-reported problems may reflect a lack of awareness of such problems, as evidenced by positive relations between defensiveness and objective indices of maladjustment.

On the other hand, several other studies emphasize that the negative correlations between levels of defensiveness and indices of personality and psychopathology are not limited to self-report measures. For example, Kurtz et al. (2008) reported positive correlations between defensiveness scores and self-report, peer-report, and parent report of extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Furthermore, Lane et al. (1990) reported a negative association between self-reported defensiveness and lifetime clinician ratings of psychiatric disorders. Accordingly, Widiger and Oltmanns (2016) have argued that scores on social desirability scales may reflect true individual differences in adaptive (as opposed to maladaptive) attributes. Uziel (2010) made the similar argument that higher scores on many social desirability scales which measure conscious deception may reflect high levels of self-control in the service of achieving social goals. In short, higher levels of defensiveness may contribute to lower scores on measures of psychological and interpersonal problems through either limited awareness of such problems or through a tendency to follow (rather than disregard) social conventions in the service of positive social and personal adjustment (Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Gallagher, 1991; Kurtz et al., 2008; Uziel, 2010; Widiger & Oltmanns, 2016).

Notwithstanding these different interpretations about the nature of defensiveness, in recent years the interest in its role has been expanded to include not only bivariate relations with self-report measures, but also investigations of its role in the associations between different measures. One way to investigate the competing possibilities about the role of defensiveness in associations between self-report measures is to examine whether the inclusion of defensiveness in a regression model changes the direct relation between an independent and a dependent variable. When the measures are collected at the same point in time, there is no way to establish a causal or even temporal sequence. In such cases, evidence that one index accounts for the shared variance between an independent and dependent variable is sometimes labeled atemporal mediation (Winer et al., 2016). If the inclusion of defensiveness weakens the association between two variables that are conceptually related, this outcome suggests that defensiveness accounts for substantive variance in the association examined (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). In such cases, that is, if defensiveness accounts for substantive variance shared between an independent variable (e.g., individual differences in the ability to regulate emotion) and a dependent variable (e.g., individual differences in

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