



# An experience sampling approach to emotion regulation: Situational suppression use and social hierarchy



Arman Daniel Catterson<sup>a,\*</sup>, Lameese Eldesouky<sup>b</sup>, Oliver P. John<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Personality and Social Research, Berkeley, CA, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis, United States

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Whereas past research has examined the use of emotion regulation strategies in terms of individual differences or responses to experimental manipulations, this research takes a naturalistic and repeated-measures approach to examine suppression use in specific situations. Using an experience sampling design, we find evidence across two samples (total  $N = 215$ ) that (1) there was substantial within-person variation in suppression use, (2) the *situational* use of suppression was explained by situational differences in extraversion and social hierarchy, and (3) when used in contexts in which people felt they were low in social hierarchy, the negative relationship between suppression and well-being was attenuated. These findings suggest there are contexts in which suppression use may not be maladaptive, and demonstrate the benefits of studying emotion processes in real-life.

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## 1. Introduction

As anyone who has felt sad at a friend's birthday party, nervous when trying to impress a first date, or proud about an accomplishment others failed to achieve knows, there are many situations in which expressing one's internal states to others might interfere with short- or long-term goals. People are not passive victims to their emotions, but instead utilize a broad range of emotion regulation strategies to modulate the experience or expression of emotion (Gross, 1998b; Gross, 2002; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Tamir, 2011).

Emotion scholars have long-recognized the important role that situations have in shaping emotion experience, expression, and social functions (Darwin, 1872; Frijda, 1986; Gross, 1998a; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Keltner & Kring, 1998; Lazarus, 1991). For example, the "modal model of emotion" (Gross, 1998b) places situations at the beginning of the emotional response process, whereas other researchers emphasize that the objective features of a situation are less important to the elicitation of an emotion than the person's subjective appraisal of that situation (Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Ellsworth, 1994; Frijda, 1988; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

However, no research has yet examined how people regulate their emotions in the kinds of specific situations that they encounter in their everyday lives. In contrast to past research that focuses on stable individual difference or retrospective daily measures of regulation strategies, in this paper we focus on individual differences in the situational use of emotion regulation. Specifically, we examine how people vary in their use of suppression across real-life social contexts, and use these data to test hypotheses about when and why people use suppression.

## 2. Emotion regulation

Though emotions are often defined in part by features of the situation, Gross (1998b) influential process model defines emotion regulation by features of the emotional response that different emotion regulation strategies target. *Expressive suppression* refers to a response-focused regulation strategy that targets only the behavioral component of an emotion. Individuals who engage in suppression attempt to reduce the overt expression of an emotion, but do nothing to change the events or appraisals of situations that give rise to the experience of emotion (Gross, 1998b; Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Levenson, 1997). For example, a person might use suppression to hide her or his visible display of anger while stuck in traffic, but would likely still feel anger on the inside.

Past research has focused on how expressive suppression differs from other strategies in terms of consequences for the experience

\* Corresponding author at: Institute of Personality and Social Research, 4141 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, United States.

E-mail address: [catterson@berkeley.edu](mailto:catterson@berkeley.edu) (A.D. Catterson).

and expression of emotion, well-being, and social functioning. Researchers consider suppression to be the emotion regulation strategy that is most directly relevant to a person's social goals because it interferes directly with the component of an emotion that signals a person's internal states to others (Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011; McRae, Heller, John, & Gross, 2011; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Russell, Bachorowski, & Fernández-Dols, 2003).

It is somewhat ironic, then, that this social emotion regulation strategy is associated with a wide range of negative social outcomes. Evidence from both lab-based interactions and studies of naturally occurring relationships suggest suppression is associated with decreased well-being, social support, relationship closeness, social warmth, and relationship satisfaction among people and those they interact with (Butler et al., 2003; English & John, 2013; English, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2012; Gross & John, 2003; Impett et al., 2012; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009; Tackman & Srivastava, 2016).

### 3. The paradox of suppression

Research on expressive suppression reveals a paradox inherent to the use of suppression: why do people continue to use a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy when less costly strategies exist? To address this question, we extend social functionalist accounts of emotion to the study of emotion regulation and examine how, when, and why people might use suppression across real-life situations.

#### 3.1. Question 1: How do people use of suppression?

To address the question of why people use suppression, it is important to first consider how people use suppression. However, of the 500-plus articles that have been published on emotion regulation since 2001, only 12% measured emotion regulation in the context of an actual social interaction (Campos et al., 2011). This discrepancy between the situations researchers study and the contexts in which emotion regulation actually takes place is problematic, since it means that researchers may not be able to fully sample the range of real-life situations in which suppression use operates.

##### 3.1.1. Past research on changes in suppression

A few researchers have begun to examine the situational use of emotion regulation by examining changes in the use of suppression in response to specific situations. For example, Srivastava et al. (2009) found that suppression use increased when students transitioned from high school to a new college environment. Similarly, McRae et al. (2011) found that participants reported using suppression less at the free-wheeling counter-culture art festival *Burning Man* than when they are in their regular home and work environment.

Other researchers have examined change in emotion regulation by measuring daily variation in suppression use. For example, in a study using daily diary methods, Nezlek and Kuppens (2008) measured suppression once a day over the course of the week, and found that participants differed as much from themselves in their use of suppression over the course of the week as they differed from each other. Le and Impett (2013) assessed daily variation over the course of two weeks, but did not report the extent to which people differed from their own average or from each other in their use of suppression.

These studies provide preliminary evidence that emotion regulation is not entirely stable. However, existing research aggregates measures of suppression use across specific momentary situations, either by measuring suppression use once at the end of the day

(e.g., Le & Impett, 2013; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008) or by comparing how suppression use differs across a major change in a person's life situation (e.g., McRae et al., 2011; Srivastava et al., 2009). The next step is to use experience sampling methods to examine how people vary in suppression use in response to specific real-life situations. This approach is needed to determine the extent to which people's use of suppression in real-life is characterized by stable individual differences and by variability across situations.

**Hypothesis 1.** On the basis of past individual difference research (e.g., Gross & John, 2003; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Srivastava et al., 2009), we expected to find significant between-person differences that characterize the stable use of suppression. However, we also expected to find substantial within-person variation in suppression use that characterizes situational suppression use. Between-person and within-person differences are conceptually and statistically distinct (Robinson, 1950; Snijders, 2011). Thus, people should differ from each other in their average use of suppression, and people should vary from their own average use of suppression across different situations.

To provide a reference for the relative amount of within-person variance in suppression, we also examined variance in cognitive reappraisal – another emotion regulation strategy that researchers often contrast with suppression (Gross, 1998b; Gross & John, 2003). Unlike suppression use, reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy that occurs before an emotion has been elicited, and is related to individual differences in general cognitive styles (Gross & Thompson, 2007; John & Gross, 2004). Though past lab-based research suggests that reappraisal use depends in part on contextual features like emotion intensity (e.g., Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, & Gross, 2011), the results from a daily diary study suggests that reappraisal may vary less than suppression (Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008) – a comparison we test in our study.

#### 3.2. Question 2: When do people use suppression across situations?

Though past theory and research emphasize the ways in which emotion and emotion regulatory processes serve as responses to situations (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Erber, Wegner, & Theriault, 1996; Gross, Richards, & John, 2006; Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008), few studies have examined the features of situations in which regulation occurs. According to appraisal theory, the specific features of a situation may be less relevant to emotion processes than the person's subjective experience of the situation that she or he inhabits (e.g., Ellsworth, 1994; Frijda, 1988; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). In this paper, we therefore tested whether suppression use would be explained by people's ratings of their own extraversion and social hierarchy in the situation – two domains that past individual difference research suggests are relevant to suppression use.

##### 3.2.1. Extraversion

Although past research points to a variety of personality dimensions that are related to the stable use of suppression, individual differences in extraversion appear to be one of the strongest predictors of stable suppression use (Gross & John, 2003; English & John, 2013). People who tend to be outgoing, energetic, enthusiastic, and assertive are significantly less likely to use a regulation strategy that inhibits the expression of emotion.

##### 3.2.2. Social hierarchy

Indicators of hierarchical relationships, such as social power, status, and class are important structural features that apply to many situations and are related to a variety of consequences for a person's behavior and emotion (French, Raven, & Cartwright,

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