



Talking about daily emotional events: Psychological well-being moderates the intensity–disclosure link[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The intensity of distressing events predicts people's disclosure of those events at between-person and within-person levels. Depression symptoms seem to attenuate the within-person relation, but past research has not taken a multidimensional view of depression as a moderator. The authors tested whether two constructs related to depression—general psychological well-being and life satisfaction—account for depression's moderating effects. In a daily diary study, college students ($N = 116$) rated the intensity of the day's most unpleasant event and their disclosure of the event each day for 14 days. Participants completed measures of disclosure tendencies, depression symptoms, well-being, and life satisfaction prior to the diary portion of the study. Multilevel modeling analyses revealed moderating effects of disclosure tendencies and depression on the within-person intensity–disclosure relation. However, when psychological well-being and life satisfaction were entered, depression was no longer a significant moderator, but well-being was. Psychological well-being therefore determines the expression of individual differences in the disclosure of daily emotional events.

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1. Introduction

In Western cultures, when people experience negative emotions, they talk about them (Rimé, 2007). This association has been observed in naturalistic and experimental studies with respect to emotions stemming from distressing events (Kahn & Garrison, 2009), chronic pain (Cano, Leong, Williams, May, & Lutz, 2012), and emotionally intense film clips (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000). Yet individuals vary in their tendency to disclose distressing emotions, a trait termed *distress disclosure* (see Kahn, Huckle, Bradley, Glinski, & Malak, 2012). Distress disclosure is conceptually distinct from self-concealment and emotional expressivity; it is positively related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and positive affect; and it is negatively related to depression and negative affect (Kahn et al., 2012). Thus, emotional disclosure has implications for well-being.

Most of the research on emotional disclosure has examined between-person differences in disclosure. Whereas the

between-person question addresses whether individuals differ from one another in their disclosure behavior, the within-person question addresses whether a given person is more likely to talk about an intense emotional event than a low-intensity event. Theories such as Rimé's (1995) theory of social sharing and Stiles's (1995) fever model would suggest the answer is yes, and empirical studies also support this idea. Garrison and Kahn (2010) had participants identify the most unpleasant event of their day, rate the intensity of their reaction to the event, and rate the degree to which they disclosed the event each day for 7 days. Multilevel modeling indicated a positive within-person relation between intensity and disclosure such that 43% of the within-person variance in disclosure was explained by the intensity of the event. This finding was replicated in a study using the same diary methodology (Garrison, Kahn, Sauer, & Florczak, 2012). Thus, not only does the intensity–disclosure link exist at the between-person level, but it exists within-person as well.

1.1. Moderators of the intensity–disclosure relation

As mentioned, not everyone discloses when distress is experienced. For example, individuals higher in distress disclosure (the trait) show greater concordance (i.e., a stronger within-person intensity–disclosure slope) between the intensity of daily events and their disclosure of those events (Garrison & Kahn, 2010). Another empirically supported moderator of the

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intensity–disclosure slope is symptoms of depression. Depression is a global problem (Ferrari et al., 2013), and even mild levels of depression command attention from practitioners (Mitchell, Rao, & Vaze, 2010). A key characteristic of depression is emotion dysregulation at several points along the emotion-generation process (see Campbell-Sills & Barlow, 2007). This includes maladaptive situation selection (e.g., situational avoidance), attentional deployment (e.g., distraction), and response modulation (e.g., expressive suppression). Consistent with this theme of emotional avoidance, Garrison and Kahn (2010) found that the relation between the intensity and disclosure of daily emotional events was weaker for individuals high in depressive symptoms than for low-symptom individuals, even while controlling for distress disclosure and gender. Garrison et al. (2012) replicated this finding while also controlling for adult attachment. This is notable because individuals experiencing depressive symptoms experience greater distress, yet they talk about their intense distress less.

The emotion-dysregulation theory of depression is a compelling explanation for this moderation effect, yet this theory cannot completely explain it. The emotion dysregulation model applies to the experiences of clinically depressed people, yet Garrison and colleagues (e.g., Garrison et al., 2012) found moderation for depression symptoms among general samples of college students. In other words, subclinical levels of depression were enough to attenuate the intensity–disclosure relation. We speculate that depression per se does not lead to diminished disclosure, but a generalized sense of unhappiness (e.g., poor well-being, dissatisfaction with life) does. Such a view is consistent with Rottenberg's (2007) emotion context insensitivity hypothesis which suggests that the frequent negative moods experienced by people with depression lead them to become desensitized to distress; thus, they would not disclose events that are even highly intense. Although Rottenberg was also describing the experiences of clinically depressed people, it may not be clinical depression as a latent entity that leads people to keep highly emotional events private; rather, heightened levels of depressed mood may be enough to moderate the intensity–disclosure relation. If so, a measure of general psychological well-being might exert a similar moderating effect on the within-person intensity–disclosure relation, and it might correspondingly diminish the moderating effect of depression symptoms. Life satisfaction, which is a component of subjective well-being and happiness, might also eliminate the moderation effect of depression symptoms.

1.2. Purpose

Our purpose was to examine whether psychological well-being explains depression's moderating effect on the within-person intensity–disclosure association. We conducted a 14-day diary study. Participants first completed measures of distress disclosure, depression symptoms, well-being, and life satisfaction. Then, in response to each day's most unpleasant emotional event, they completed measures of the event's intensity and how much they disclosed the event. We hypothesized that higher levels of distress disclosure and lower levels of depression symptoms would strengthen the intensity–disclosure relations. However, when controlling for well-being and life satisfaction, we hypothesized that depression would no longer function as a moderator.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

U.S. college students were recruited through research sign-up boards between September and November. Although 157

participants began the study, 41 were eliminated from the sample because they did not provide sufficient daily data (see Section 3 for more detail). The final sample was therefore 116 participants (101 women, 15 men), of whom 88 were European American, 11 were African American, 9 were Latino/Latina, 5 were biracial/multiracial, 1 was Asian American, and 2 who did not report their ethnic background.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Distress Disclosure Index (DDI)

The DDI (Kahn & Hessling, 2001) is a 12-item self-report measure of one's tendency to disclose distress. Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We computed the mean of the 12 items, and higher scores indicated a greater tendency to disclose (versus conceal) distress. Scores from the DDI demonstrate high internal consistency, with alphas ranging from .89 to .95 (Kahn et al., 2012); coefficient alpha for this study was .94. DDI scores are related to college students' disclosure of specific unpleasant events (Garrison & Kahn, 2010; Kahn & Garrison, 2009).

2.2.2. Inventory of Depression and Anxiety Symptoms (IDAS)

On the IDAS (Watson et al., 2007), participants rate how much they have experienced 64 symptoms during the past week on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The 20-item General Depression scale was our measure of depression symptoms; scores for the General Depression scale were the mean of the items. For Watson et al.'s samples of college students, internal consistency of scores from the General Depression scale was .89; coefficient alpha in this study was .86. Convergent validity was demonstrated by a correlation of .83 between the IDAS and Beck Depression Inventory-II (Watson et al., 2007).

We also used the 8-item Well-Being scale from the IDAS; higher scores indicated greater well-being. Watson et al. (2007) reported coefficients alpha of .82 and .84 for two samples of college students; coefficient alpha was .88 in this study. Watson et al. found Well-Being scores to be negatively related to the measures of depression and anxiety on the IDAS.

2.2.3. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS (Deiner, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item scale measuring life satisfaction as an evaluation of life as a whole. Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Item responses were averaged, and higher scores indicated higher levels of life satisfaction. A coefficient alpha of .87 has been reported (Deiner et al., 1985); coefficient alpha for this study was also .87. Scores from the SWLS show validity vis-à-vis measures of positive and negative affect (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996).

2.2.4. Daily measures

The daily questionnaire prompted participants to think about the emotional events experienced that day: "Please think about the most significant unpleasant event that you experienced since the time you woke up, and provide a very brief description of it." They then completed measures of the emotional intensity and their actual disclosure of the event.

2.2.4.1. Emotional intensity. After describing the event, participants rated the emotional intensity of the event using the following questions from Garrison et al. (2012): "How intense was your emotional reaction to the unpleasant event right when it occurred?" and "How negative were your feelings about this unpleasant event?" Ratings were made on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*a very slight amount or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) and

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