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Being with others and feeling happy: Emotional expressivity in everyday life

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ABSTRACT

An experience sampling study assessed the relation between psychological functioning in daily life and emotional expressivity as measured by the emotional expressivity scale (EES). Four hundred and twenty-nine participants carried personal digital assistants that signaled them 8 times daily to complete questionnaires assessing affect, activities, and social contact. As predicted, participants high in emotional expressivity were more likely to have elevated state positive affect, but not negative affect. These participants were also less likely to be alone and more likely to demonstrate better social functioning when with others. Cross-level interactions indicated that emotional expressivity moderated the association of social context and functioning in the moment. The findings support the validity of the EES as a measure of emotional expressivity and demonstrate the utility of experience sampling for describing personality traits in daily life.

1. Introduction

The expression of emotions is an integral part of adaptive human functioning (Dobbs, Sloan, & Karpinski, 2007), and dysfunction in emotional expression is a core feature of many forms of psychopathology (e.g., Kring, 2008). Expressing emotions has been linked to positive physical and mental health in the general population (Sloan & Marx, 2004) and in specific groups such as breast cancer patients (Stanton et al., 2000) and older adults (Shaw et al., 2003). Emotional expressivity is positively associated with the personality traits of extraversion (Riggio & Riggio, 2002), openness to experience, and agreeableness (Leising, Müller, & Hahn, 2007). People with higher levels of emotional expressivity derive greater pleasure from social interactions (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994). Conversely, lower levels of emotional expressivity have been linked to social anhedonia (Leung, Couture, Blanchard, Lin, & Llerena, 2010), depression (Sloan, Strauss, & Wisner, 2001), schizophrenia (Earnst & Kring, 1999), and other psychological impairments (Watson, Pettingale, & Greer, 1984).

There are several models of dispositional emotional expressivity (e.g., Gross & John, 1995). For example, older models of emotional expressivity focused on the extent to which individuals self-monitored their presentation of expressive and nonverbal behavior (Snyder, 1974). Others have focused specifically on the behavioral changes (e.g., facial expression) that accompany the experience of emotions (Gross & John, 1995). The current study employs a construct proposed by Kring et al. (1994) that defines emotional expressivity as the extent to which a person outwardly displays emotions regardless of valence or channel. They characterize emotional expressivity as a stable, individual difference characteristic. To assess this construct, Kring and colleagues (1994) developed the self-report emotional expressivity scale (EES). We selected this formulation of emotional expressivity and its corresponding measure because it is applicable to a range of normal and pathological functioning. For example, pathological emotional inexpressivity is associated with flattened affect seen in schizophrenia-spectrum disorders, whereas excessive emotional expression is part of borderline and histrionic personality disorders (e.g., Crawford & Cohen, 2007; Freeman, Freeman, & Rosenfield, 2005; Herpertz et al., 2001). Kring et al.'s construct was carefully operationalized and their measure has demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity based on both self-report, other report, and observational methods of assessment.

Consistent with their conceptualization of the construct as unidimensional and stable, Kring et al. (1994) indicated that the EES demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of .90–.93) and good short-term test–retest reliability. Coefficient alpha values were replicated by Barr, Kahn, and Schneider (2008) and Dobbs et al. (2007). In addition, research has supported a one-factor structure of this scale (Dobbs et al., 2007). Barr et al.

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(2008) reported that the EES is highly correlated with other measures of emotional expressivity, such as the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire (Gross & John, 1995) and the Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire (King & Emmons, 1990).

Although Kring and colleagues (1994) indicated that the EES was associated with emotionality, they reported that the EES was not associated with trait-based measures of positive or negative affect. They did, however, find that the EES is significantly related to affect intensity. Specifically, the more expressive people report they are, the more likely they are to report that they experience these emotions more strongly. Furthermore, their findings indicated that higher levels of emotional expressivity predicted feelings of life satisfaction as measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which measures global satisfaction, a component of subjective well-being. Kring and colleagues explain that this relationship may reflect the small but significant overlap between emotional expressivity and the satisfaction with life component of subjective well-being. Research using the EES has yet to examine its relationship with levels of state affect. Given these findings, we expected that emotional expressivity would predict levels of positive affect in terms of items relating to daily life subjective well-being (e.g., satisfaction, happiness) but not items relating to negative affect (e.g., sadness, loneliness).

Consistent with the findings that higher levels of emotional expressivity are related to elevated levels of extraversion and reduced levels of social anhedonia, we hypothesized that increased levels of emotional expressivity would also be associated with greater levels of daily social contact and a preference to be with others. This prediction is consistent with the findings from Kring and colleagues (1994) who proposed that the adjectives used to describe extraversion are conceptually related to expression (e.g., open, outgoing). In addition, they found that expressiveness was correlated with surgency, a measure of extraversion. These results suggest that those high in emotional expressivity also tend to be outgoing and sociable. Furthermore, higher levels of emotional expressivity would also be associated with increased positive social experiences when with others, and greater enjoyment of current activities.

Finally, given the relationship between emotional expressivity with extraversion and social anhedonia, we examined how levels of emotional expressivity influenced the levels of positive affect and negative affect when participants were with others or alone. We predicted that those with higher levels of emotional expressivity would report lower levels of positive affect and greater levels of negative affect when they are alone. We also examined how emotional expressivity affects the relationship between levels of liking the people they are interacting with and their feelings towards interacting with them. Again, given emotional expressivity's relationship with extraversion and social anhedonia, we predicted that those with higher levels of emotional expressivity will value their interactions with others more the more they like those people.

Despite the large literature to date, no study thus far has examined the momentary experience of emotional expressivity in daily life. The current study employed experience-sampling methodology (ESM) to assess emotional expressivity in daily life. ESM is a within-day self-assessment technique in which participants are prompted at random intervals to complete questionnaires. Specifically, ESM repeatedly assesses participants in their daily environment (enhancing ecological validity), assesses experiences in the moment (minimizing retrospective bias), and examines the context of participants' experiences.

The goal of the current study was to examine the experience of emotional expressivity in daily life in a large sample of young adults. Specifically, it examines the experience of emotional expressivity in terms of daily affect, activities, and social functioning. The study should provide additional evidence regarding the validity of the EES as a measure of emotional expressivity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included 429 undergraduates (317 female and 112 male) enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro who volunteered and received credit toward a research option in a psychology course. The sample was 74% Caucasian and 26% African American with mean age of 19.8 years (SD = 2.9). Results did not differ by gender, age, or ethnicity, so findings are presented for the entire sample.

2.2. Materials and procedures

Participants completed the EES on one occasion as part of mass-screening sessions. The EES is a 17-item self-report measure that assesses the outward display of emotions across a range of severity. EES items do not mention specific positive or negative emotions; instead, they refer to general displays of emotions. Example items include, "I display my emotions to other people" and "People can read my emotions." Items are scored from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree." EES scores are computed by taking the mean of these scores. Higher means indicate greater levels of emotional expressivity.

ESM data were collected using personal digital assistants (PDAs) running iESP software (Intel, 2004). Compared with other options, PDAs yield good compliance rates and data quality (Burgin, Silvia, Eddington, & Kwapil, in press; Green, Rafaeli, Bolger, Shrout, & Reis, 2006). Participants attended an information session in which they were provided with a PDA and informed about the procedures of the study. The PDA signaled participants randomly 8 times daily between noon and midnight for 7 days. Once participants were signaled, they had up to 5 min to initiate the questionnaire. The ESM questionnaire consisted of 36 items inquiring about cognition, affect, activities, and social contact at the time of the signal (see Table 1 for the questions used in this study). The ESM items assessed information about participants' positive and negative affect, and current social context. Note that because of branching questions participants completed 28 or 32 items at each ESM assessment (depending on whether they were alone or not). The ESM questionnaire was developed as part of a larger study on ecological momentary assessment of psychopathology, and it was used in Brown et al.'s (2011) study of depression and Kwapil et al.'s (2009) study of social anhedonia in daily life. The majority of the items were answered on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Several items (e.g., Are you alone at this time?) were answered dichotomously (yes/no). Note that ESM research frequently relies on single item measures. However, Hektner, Schmidt, and Csikszentmihalyi (2007) noted, "the use of a single item is less of a reliability risk in ESM research because repeated measurement takes the place of multiple items" (p. 116).

The questionnaires required about two minutes to complete. After completion of the questionnaire, the PDA would become inactive until the next questionnaire. Participants met with experimenters twice during the week to download their data from the PDA to minimize data loss and increase compliance.

3. Results

The EES mean for the sample was 4.59 (SD = 1.18, coefficient alpha = .93), with an approximately normal distribution, consistent with findings from Kring and colleagues (1994). Participants