A Situational Analysis of Emotion Regulation: Exploring the Role of Emotion-Strategy Associations in Regulating Negative Affect

Prior research has shown that people tend to associate specific emotions with specific emotion regulation strategies (Leshin, Sheeran, & Lindquist, in prep). This study tested the hypothesis that these emotion-strategy (E x S) associations influence the efficacy of peoples’ use of specific emotion regulation strategies when people are asked to use those strategies to regulate specific emotions. We specifically examined E x S associations between emotion regulation strategies reappraisal and suppression and the emotion categories fear and sadness. Online participants (N = 188) were first asked to indicate the extent to which they associate reappraisal or suppression with regulating fear and sadness using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = a lot). They were then exposed to fear- and sadness-eliciting images and were instructed across trials to regulate their emotions using both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression; all participants were trained on emotion regulation strategies before any experimental trials were administered. Regulation blocks (Reappraisal, Suppression, and View [Control] and emotion conditions (Fear, Sadness) were randomly presented. We operationalized E x S associations as the difference between the extent to which fear was associated with a particular emotion regulation strategy (e.g., reappraisal) and the extent to which sadness was associated with said emotion regulation strategy. We found partial evidence for our hypothesis. As expected, participants who associate sadness with suppression more than fear were more likely to report reduced sadness intensity when suppressing responses to sad (v. fear)-eliciting stimuli. We did not find that associating reappraisal with either emotion predicted reappraisal success to either emotion. This study provides initial experimental support for the hypothesis that context-dependent emotion knowledge is related to emotion regulation efficacy.