BRIEF REPORT

Cognitive Reappraisal in the Context of Oppression: Implications for Psychological Functioning

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Research on emotion regulation has shown cognitive reappraisal to be positively correlated with better psychological functioning. Prior research has failed to account for contextual influences on this important relationship. We examined how this relationship plays out across two United States ethnic groups that represent different contexts of oppression: Puerto Ricans, experiencing distal oppression (societal level) but not proximal oppression (immediate environment), and Latino Americans, experiencing both. We also captured individual beliefs regarding oppression of one’s group and implications of that oppression by measuring oppressed minority ideology (OMI). Results confirmed our hypothesis that the relationship between reappraisal and psychological functioning would be moderated by the context of oppression (as measured by ethnic group membership and OMI). For Latino Americans high on OMI, reappraisal was negatively associated with psychological functioning. For Puerto Ricans, regardless of OMI, this relationship remained positive, suggesting a possible benefit for minorities in being surrounded by in-group members.

Keywords: cognitive reappraisal, depression, life satisfaction, oppression, ethnic minority

Emotion regulation can be described as the process by which we attempt to control what emotions we have and when and how we express them (Gross, 1998); this process can be both conscious and deliberate (Gross, 1998) or automatic (Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007). Empirical work has demonstrated that multiple emotion regulation strategies are reliably linked to psychological functioning (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & John, 2003). One such strategy, cognitive reappraisal, refers to the process of altering how one thinks about an emotion-eliciting event such that the outcome is positive or the event carries less personal relevance (Gross, 1998).

The typical use of cognitive reappraisal (henceforth reappraisal) as an emotion regulation strategy has been linked to a number of positive outcomes including success in social interactions, greater well-being and life satisfaction, and less depression (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & John, 2003). Thus, as described in the literature, the regular use of reappraisal is believed to be functional, or adaptive. Although the positive outcomes associated with reappraisal have been demonstrated across several domains of functioning, the generalizability of these outcomes has not been widely shown. In fact, some have recently argued that the relationship between emotion regulation and health may be substantially influenced by multiple contextual factors, including individual and sociocultural characteristics (Butler & Gross, 2009; Consedine, Magai, & Bonanno, 2002). For example, Consedine and colleagues (2002) suggest three main classes of moderators for the regulation—health relationship: individual characteristics, social or cultural characteristics, and characteristics of the emotion being regulated. Similarly, Butler and Gross (2009) highlight the importance of understanding the role of group- and individual-level variables in relation to emotion regulation. The present study follows in the spirit of these recommendations by aiming to understand the impact of being an oppressed minority (sociocultural characteristic) and personally endorsing an oppressed minority ideology (individual characteristic) on the relationship between reappraisal and psychological functioning.

Emotion Regulation, Culture, and Context

Studies of emotion regulation and culture have provided preliminary indication that divergent contexts play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of certain emotion regulation strategies. For example, Butler, Lee, and Gross (2007, 2009) found that the negative physiological and social consequences associated with expressive suppression (masking what one feels) during a social interaction task were reduced for Asian American participants and for individuals who identified more with Asian values than European values. Comparing two cultures within Nepal, Cole and Tamang (1998) demonstrated differences in the propensity to want to both express and mask negative emotions among Chhetri-Brahmin (Hindu) versus Tamang (Buddhist) children. As the authors of these studies suggest, cultural and contextual variables...
may determine both the selection of emotion regulation strategies and whether they are experienced as adaptive or maladaptive. A similar argument, recently advanced by Matsumoto et al. (2008), presents a model whereby culture shapes and organizes social order via defining norms around emotion regulation.

Interestingly, the differences in previous studies have all emerged from studying suppression of emotions as a regulation strategy. Not surprisingly, many studies have documented different patterns in the usage of suppression across cultures and ethnic minority groups (Gross & John, 2003; Matsumoto et al., 2008; Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2010) but not in the use of reappraisal. Matsumoto et al. (2008) suggest that use of reappraisal as an emotion regulation strategy may be more affected by contexts representing differing worldviews or belief systems than by cultural background, per se. We provide an empirical test of that notion by considering one such context that may moderate the relationship between reappraisal and psychological functioning—ethnic minority oppression.

**A Multi-Level Perspective on Oppression**

Oppression can be defined as the exercise of power by one group over another by either force or deprivation (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). Research on ethnic minorities in the United States provides compelling evidence that they exist in a context of oppression (Jones, 1997). Ethnic minorities experience discrimination in greater numbers and at greater frequency than European Americans (Soto, Dawson-Andoh, & Belue, 2010; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). The experience of discrimination and prejudice, itself a stressful event (Major & O’Brien, 2005), may also adversely affect other outcomes such as education, employment, housing, health, and health care (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Such realities suggest that many U.S. ethnic minorities live in a context where the challenges and struggles associated with their minority status (e.g., racism, discrimination) are poignant reminders of their larger oppression.

As Hanna et al. (2000) suggest, however, “to imply that all minority group members are oppressed is, of course, inaccurate and overstated” (p. 431). Environmental and individual factors are also likely to affect one’s experience of oppression. Thus, a more nuanced unpacking of oppression is necessary to understand how it may influence processes such as emotion regulation and psychological health. To this end, we introduce a new framework for an individual’s overall context of oppression by considering both distal and proximal levels of oppression associated with ethnic group membership, as well as personal ideology about being an oppressed minority.

**Distal oppression** refers to the extent to which one’s ethnic group is in a position of less power given the prevailing societal structure. In the U.S., any non-White ethnic group experiences distal oppression by virtue of their ethnic group membership. Thus, distal oppression is assumed, implied, or recognized given the existing power structure within a society. **Proximal oppression** refers to the extent to which an individual is likely exposed to oppression in their immediate environment. This level of oppression captures qualities about one’s cultural milieu that may protect or predispose individuals to direct experiences of oppression. We propose that chief among these qualities is the extent to which members of oppressed groups are surrounded by other in-group members. As such, variation in the experience of proximal oppression is expected within groups (relative to distal oppression), although still conceptualized as outside the individual. Oppressed minority ideology (OMI), on the other hand, captures personal beliefs regarding the oppression faced by one’s ethnic group and the implications of that oppression. As construed here, distal and proximal oppression reflect group-level variables whereas OMI reflects an individual difference variable.

**Reappraisal in the Context of Oppression**

Within a context of oppression, dealing with situations that invoke negative emotions such as anger and resentment may be a regular part of daily life (Swim et al., 2003). On the surface, using reappraisal may be a logical strategy to use in such circumstances, given the positive outcomes typically associated with its frequent use. However, we propose that different levels of oppression may interact to drastically change the “adaptive” qualities of reappraisal for ethnic minorities. In fact, prior research has shown that the context of stigmatized groups might render reappraisal protective or detrimental depending on the resulting attribution (Crocker & Major, 1989). Others have also suggested an interaction between the use of reappraisal and the experience of oppression on psychological outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

For example, Latinos in a rural, U.S., college town and Latinos in Puerto Rico would both be considered to experience distal oppression (Torres & Velazquez, 1998), but the former would be expected to experience greater proximal oppression given the smaller number of Latinos in that region. In this case, the daily experiences of Latino Americans might include greater vigilance about anti-foreigner sentiments, concerns about discrimination and racism, concerns about personal safety, and cynicism about equality and justice. However, members of ethnic minority groups may accept these issues as unavoidable to their minority status and may discount these different life circumstances in explaining their emotional experiences (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010). Thus, these two groups may employ reappraisal in response to negative life events and enjoy a similar positive outcome (e.g., a Latino American and Puerto Rican may be equally likely to attribute being fired to the bad economy or a difficult employer as opposed to personal failure). However, when the experience of distal and proximal oppression are combined with a personal acknowledgment that one is part of an oppressed group and should interact with the world as such (i.e., high OMI), the concerns regarding minority status, noted above, may become more salient. Within this “triple oppression” context (distal, proximal, and personal oppression), attempts at reappraising may have the opposite of the intended consequence and lead to greater frustration or negativity (e.g., attributing being fired to a racist boss may make someone feel more depressed or angry at the racial inequity in society). Our theory suggests that for those who typically rely on reappraisal to deal with negative emotions, a multiply oppressive context may provide quite a challenge given the limited number of positive reinterpretations.

**The Present Study**

The present study focuses on two ethnic groups, Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico and Latinos living in the U.S. mainland, that...
capture varying levels of distal and proximal oppression. As suggested above, Puerto Ricans experience distal but not proximal oppression, while Latinos in the U.S. represent the dual experience of distal and proximal oppression. In addition, we measured individual differences in oppressed minority ideology. We hypothesized that the benefits of reappraisal would be negated for ethnic minority groups experiencing oppression across multiple levels (i.e., distal, proximal, and personal oppression). Thus, we predicted a three-way interaction of reappraisal, ethnic group membership, and OMI in predicting (a) depressed mood and (b) life satisfaction. Specifically, for Latino Americans high on OMI, we expected reappraisal to negatively correlate with psychological functioning; for Puerto Ricans, regardless of OMI, we expected this relationship to remain positive.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 287 students from The Pennsylvania State University (PSU; \( n = 35 \)) and University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez (UPR; \( n = 252 \)). Participants from PSU self-identified as Latino (31% Puerto Rican, 14% Mexican, 11% Colombian, 9% Cuban, 9% Ecuadorian, 9% Peruvian, 6% Venezuelan, and 12% other South American) and UPR participants self-identified as Puerto Rican. All participants were at least 18 years old (Latino American: \( M = 18.94, SD = 1.03 \); Puerto Rican: \( M = 20.53, SD = 2.36 \)) and roughly half were female (Latino American: \( 54\% \); Puerto Rican: \( 56\% \)). Participants completed an online survey receiving either course credit (PSU) or eight dollars (UPR) as compensation for completing the study.

Measures

Cognitive reappraisal. We used the 6-item Cognitive Reappraisal subscale of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) to assess usage of reappraisal. Using a 7-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), scores are summed to represent general usage of reappraisal as an emotion regulation strategy (e.g., “When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I’m thinking about the situation” and “When I want to feel less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I’m thinking about”). Gross and John (2003) demonstrated adequate internal reliability, 3-month test–retest reliability, and adequate convergent and discriminant validity. Alpha coefficients for our Latino American and Puerto Rican subsamples were .82 and .80, respectively.

Psychological functioning. The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was used to measure depressive symptomatology. Respondents are asked to answer the extent to which they have experienced 20 symptoms in the past week using a 4-point scale (0 = rarely or none of the time [less than 1 day]; 3 = most or all of the time [5–7 days]). Item responses are summed with higher scores indicating greater depressed mood. Radloff (1977) warns against interpreting high group averages in terms of rates of illness instead of simply level of symptoms. Adequate reliability and validity were established for this measure (see Radloff); Cronbach’s alphas for our Latino American and Puerto Rican subsamples were .90 and .89, respectively.

The 5-item, self-report Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to measure life satisfaction. Utilizing a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), responses are summed to create a single global factor. Diener et al. (1985) established adequate reliability and validity. This study found Cronbach’s alphas of .88 for both the Latino American and Puerto Rican subsamples.

Oppressed minority ideology. We used the 7-item Oppressed Minority subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), using a 7-point scale, to measure the tendency to hold an ideology characterized by hyper-awareness of one’s own, as well as others’, experiences of oppression. Reliability and validity were adequately established by Sellers et al. (1997). Because the MIBI was designed for use with Black individuals, we implemented a modified version replacing the word “Black” with “my racial group” (e.g., “The same forces which have led to the oppression of my racial group have also led to the oppression of other groups”). Similar modifications have been utilized successfully in prior research (Johnson, Robinson Kurpius, Dixon Rayle, Arredondo, & Tovar-Gamero, 2005) and we found Cronbach’s alphas of .69 and .84 for the Latino American and Puerto Rican subsamples, respectively.

Results

Preliminary analysis revealed no significant differences between Latino Americans and Puerto Ricans on reappraisal, \( t(285) = -1.58, p = .12 \), depressed mood, \( t(285) = 1.66, p = .10 \), life satisfaction, \( t(285) = -0.88, p = .38 \), or OMI, \( t(285) = -1.43, p = .15 \). Next, we tested our primary hypotheses by conducting hierarchical multiple regressions—the first with reappraisal as the predictor variable, group membership and OMI as moderator variables, and depressed mood as the criterion variable. The initial step of this analysis showed that reappraisal was a significant negative predictor of depressed mood, \( F(1, 285) = 7.74, p = .006, \Delta R^2 = .03 \); intervening steps revealed no additional significant main effects or two-way interactions, \( F(5, 280) = 1.42, p = .22, \Delta R^2 = .02 \). The final step revealed a significant three-way interaction between reappraisal, group membership, and OMI, \( F(1, 279) = 7.07, p = .008, \Delta R^2 = .02 \), supporting our hypothesis.

For ease of interpretation, follow-up analyses were conducted on each group as two, two-way interactions, illustrated in Figure 1. For Latino Americans, reappraisal was not a significant predictor of depressed mood, \( F(1, 33) = 0.37, p = .56, \Delta R^2 = .01 \), nor did OMI add significant variance, \( F(1, 32) = 1.40, p = .25, \Delta R^2 = .04 \). However, the interaction between reappraisal and OMI was significant, \( F(1, 31) = 7.98, p = .008, \Delta R^2 = 19\% \), accounting for an additional 19% of the variance in depressed mood (\( \Delta R^2 = .19 \)). As hypothesized, reappraisal predicted decreased depressed mood for Latino Americans low on OMI but increased depressed mood for Latino Americans high on OMI. For Puerto Ricans, reappraisal was a significant predictor of depressed mood, \( F(1, 250) = 9.11, p = .003, \Delta R^2 = .04 \), but neither OMI, \( F(1, 249) = 1.15, p = .29, \Delta R^2 < .01 \), nor the interaction of reappraisal and OMI, \( F(1, 248) = 0.12, p = .74, \Delta R^2 < .01 \), added significant variance. As hypothesized,
reappraisal was associated with decreased depressed mood for Puerto Ricans both low and high on OMI. A second hierarchical multiple regression was performed with life satisfaction as the criterion variable. Results of the first and second steps showed that reappraisal was a significant positive predictor of life satisfaction, \( F(1, 285) = 13.37, p < .001, R^2 = .05 \), while OMI was a significant negative predictor of life satisfaction, \( F(1, 284) = 6.02, p = .02, \Delta R^2 = .02 \). The final step revealed no additional significant main effects or two-way interactions, \( F(4, 280) = 1.60, p = .17, \Delta R^2 = .02 \). The interaction of reappraisal and OMI, \( F(1, 279) = 4.95, p = .03, \Delta R^2 = .02 \), was significant predictors of life satisfaction, \( F(1, 33) = 0.14, p = .71, R^2 < .01 \), but OMI did not add significant variance, \( F(1, 32) = 5.05, p = .03, R^2 = .14, \Delta R^2 = .14 \). The interaction between reappraisal and OMI was significant, \( F(1, 31) = 9.22, p = .005 \), accounting for an additional 20% of the variance in life satisfaction (\( \Delta R^2 = .20 \)). Specifically, a trend emerged for reappraisal predicting increased life satisfaction among Latino Americans low on OMI; as hypothesized, reappraisal was associated with increased life satisfaction for Latino Americans high on OMI. For Puerto Ricans, both reappraisal, \( F(1, 250) = 15.01, p < .001, R^2 = .06 \), and OMI, \( F(1, 249) = 4.30, p = .04, \Delta R^2 = .02 \), were significant predictors of life satisfaction. However, the interaction of reappraisal and OMI did not add significant variance, \( F(1, 248) = 0.32, p = .57, \Delta R^2 < .01 \). As hypothesized, reappraisal was associated with increased life satisfaction for Puerto Ricans both low and high on OMI.

Figure 1. Relationship between cognitive reappraisal and depression under high and low levels of OMI in Latino Americans and Puerto Ricans. \(^* p < .05. \)

Figure 2. Relationship between cognitive reappraisal and life satisfaction under high and low levels of OMI in Latino Americans and Puerto Ricans. \(^* p < .10. \)

\( \Delta R^2 \) OMI
Discussion

Reappraisal has been consistently linked to numerous positive outcomes in a number of important domains of functioning (Gross & John, 2003). The principal aim of this study was to investigate whether the relationship between reappraisal and psychological functioning is moderated by differing contexts of oppression. We measured oppression via ethnic group membership (capturing distal and proximal level oppression) and personal endorsement of an OMI. We found evidence of a three-way interaction such that for individuals who experience distal oppression, proximal oppression, and identify highly with an OMI, reappraisal was associated with decreased psychological functioning.

Our findings raise a number of important considerations with respect to emotion regulation and ethnic minorities within the U.S. (and possibly in other countries). First, when contextual variables are not taken into consideration, the benefits of reappraisal are robust, consistent with prior research (Gross & John, 2003). Second, this generally washes-out some meaningful differences in the same strategy’s effectiveness among individuals with differing experiences of oppression. In this regard, Latino Americans (experiencing distal and proximal oppression) who were also high on OMI faced a triple jeopardy of sorts that appeared to reverse the typical benefits associated with reappraisal. Greater oppressive contexts may lead to experiences of “failed” reappraisal in which “healthier” interpretations of the situation seem impossible, given these individuals’ particular worldview and life circumstances. We suggest that searching for a new solution in this case may emulate the process of depressive rumination (see Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009). Third, the fact that Puerto Ricans also high on OMI maintained the positive effects of reappraisal suggests that the negative association between reappraisal and psychological functioning observed in Latino Americans may be prevented by reducing the proximal experience of oppression (e.g., increasing the presence of similar minorities).

Limitations

As is the case with cross-sectional studies, we cannot infer causation from these findings. Future research will need to use experimental designs to delineate the specific impact of reappraisal in relation to oppression. Second, the constructs of distal and proximal oppression were inferred from group membership and knowledge about the environment for the members of these groups. While our data provide some support that we adequately captured the constructs intended, devising an explicit measure of these levels of oppression is an important future direction. Furthermore, our two groups may have differed on other variables (e.g., primary language spoken, cultural values) that might also explain the differences found, although this alternative is tempered by the lack of group differences on our variables of interest or a group by reappraisal interaction. Lastly, our measure of reappraisal was not specific enough to determine what kinds of reappraisal our participants were making that were associated with poorer functioning.

Conclusion

Our findings point to important, real-world consequences for individuals existing in contexts where oppressive factors are prevalent. For clinicians working with ethnic minorities acknowledging an oppressive environment, suggesting a positive reframe may actually be harmful (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009). Instead, clinicians may help lessen distress by supporting accurate assessments/reappraisals of how the client is perceived by others under conditions of social threat (Thomaes, Reijn特斯, Orobio de Castro, & Bushman, 2009). Therefore, clinicians may want to encourage activities that promote one’s cultural group. Incidentally, our findings add to the literature that points to the benefits associated with increased diversity (Herring, 2009; Mor Barak & Levin, 2002) by suggesting that being surrounded by similar others contributes to better psychological health among ethnic minorities. Thus, simply increasing diversity in the immediate environment may increase the psychological fortitude of minorities facing oppression, allowing them to fully reap the benefits of reappraisal.

References

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