Building an Effective Emotion Regulation Repertoire: An Arts and Humanities Perspective

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Summary:

Emotion regulation (ER) refers to the process through with people manage various components of their emotions. An effective repertoire of ER strategies helps in satisfactory emotion regulation in diverse circumstances. Using Bonanno and Burton's Regulatory Flexibility model, this paper illustrates various practical ways through which a competent ER repertoire can be built, with particular focus on the fields of arts and humanities. Other potential paths for building a repertoire are also discussed briefly in order to guide future research.

The topic of Emotion Regulation (ER) - the process by which we manage and respond to one or more components of an emotion - has become one of the most extensively researched and rapidly growing domains in psychology (Gross, 2013). With continuous advancements and discoveries of new questions and applications, it is a dynamic field with novel possibilities at every turn. Various frameworks and models have been developed in recent times in order to

better organise and take stock of these possibilities and findings (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Fredrickson, 2001; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Gross, 1998, etc.).

While some of these studies take a bounded approach, focusing on specific emotions and emotion regulation strategies (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & Levenson, 1997; McRae et al., 2010; Richards & Gross, 2000; Srivastava et al. 2009), others give attention to the variability and differences among and within individuals with respect to a range of these strategies (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004; Lougheed & Hollenstein, 2012).

Within the latter, the Regulatory Flexibility model proposed by Bonanno and Burton (2013), which emphasises the individual differences in emotion regulation, presents three sequential components for operationalizing this construct of flexibility - sensitivity to context, availability of a repertoire of strategies, and responsiveness to feedback.

Context sensitivity, as the name suggests, is about being able to discriminate between various contexts and situations. In order for effective emotion regulation to take place, it is important that the individual be able to understand the "*shifting nature of contextual demands across time*", as different contexts would require the implementation of different regulation strategies. For example, while it may be beneficial to suppress emotions like fear when about to face an opponent (Bonanno et al., 2004), suppression of emotions in various other contexts might actually lead to adverse consequences like memory deficits (Richards & Gross, 2000), higher sympathetic activation (Gross, 1998), and difficulty in maintaining close social relationships (Butler et al., 2003). Thus, the ability to adaptively *"read the room"* (Caballero & Knupsky, 2019) so that the most appropriate strategy can be administered is a significant factor in determining effective emotion regulation.

However, simply being sensitive to the situation is not enough. The availability of different emotion regulation strategies is also important, as it is only when one has access to a

range of ER strategies for varying situations, will it be possible to select the most appropriate one. That's where Bonanno and Burton's second component of regulatory flexibility - a **repertoire of strategies** - comes in. The assessment of an individual's repertoire of ER strategies can broadly be based on three factors - the number of strategies, temporal variability, and categorical variability of strategies (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). The aim of the present paper is to delve deeper into these factors, and determine how one can potentially build an effective repertoire of emotion regulation strategies.

Before beginning with that though, it is essential to acknowledge the need for feedback and a consequent change of strategy, as the emotion regulation of an individual is not always on-point (Sheppes et al., 2012). The final sequential component of the regulatory flexibility model - **responsiveness to feedback** - is thus equally important for effective emotion regulation to take place. This involves the ability to judge the efficaciousness of the implemented regulation strategy, and to maintain, modify, or altogether change the strategy accordingly (Bonanno & Burton, 2013).

All three of these components are interrelated, and work together to improve the emotion regulation of individuals. The repertoire component will be the focus of the present paper. Specifically, I will be considering potential ways which could help individuals build effective emotion regulation repertoires. Before that, it is worthwhile to ask why exactly is a repertoire of ER strategies important, and what makes an effective repertoire. So, it is only after addressing these two domains will I move on to present my suggestions for building a good repertoire.

As discussed above, simply being context sensitive cannot guarantee satisfactory emotion regulation. Having access to options of regulation strategies is also integral. Why? The efficiency of different emotion regulation strategies varies in different contexts (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Thus, in order to implement the most adept strategy for a particular unique

instance, it is important to have a repertoire of ER strategies. Various factors have been assessed for examining what makes an effective repertoire, and three of these are of core essence - the number of strategies, temporal variability, and categorical variability of strategies (Bonanno & Burton, 2013).

In a study assessing the traumatic records of women after a campus mass shooting, a negative correlation was found between traumatic stress and number of employable emotion regulation strategies available. The levels of traumatic stress were higher in students who reported having access to fewer number of emotion regulation strategies (Orcutt et al., 2014). Inflexibility in emotion regulation, which indicates, in part, a lack of regulation strategies (Westphal et al., 2010), has been associated with increased perplexity and misery in college students even 2 years after the 9/11 New York attacks (Bonanno et al., 2004). This underlines the importance of having a **higher number of emotion regulation strategies** in your repertoire so as to facilitate better and more efficient emotion regulation.

Next, the temporal variability - use of varying strategies at different points of time and stressor situations - is an important factor when determining the parameters that make a repertoire beneficial (Cheng, 2001). Temporal variability can be viewed as an explicit interrelation between the components of context sensitivity and repertoire of regulation strategies. By assessing distinct situations at distinct points of time (context sensitivity), diverse ER strategies (repertoire) will have to be employed for effective ER to occur. Thus, the factor of temporal variability highlights the importance of **context sensitivity** for the making of an effective repertoire.

Categorical variability relates to a use of diverse types of strategies for emotion regulation. Lougheed and Hollenstein (2012), in their comprehensive study for examining emotion regulation in adolescence, highlighted the importance of using a range of strategies in contrast to a single "adaptive" strategy. Adolescents who reflected higher use of fewer variety

of strategies were found to have more problematic associations like depression and anxiety, than those who used a range of diverse strategies moderately. In another study, it was found that bereaved adults who were suffering from Complicated Grief (CG) showed a less expressive, i.e., less categorically variable repertoire of ER strategies than bereaved adults who no longer suffered from CG (Gupta and Bonanno, 2011). This draws attention to the importance of having a mixed bag of emotion regulation strategies as opposed to a bag of homogeneous strategies at your disposal. Having an **expressive and variable repertoire** is thus valuable.

Having explained why a repertoire is needed, and what major factors constitute a good and effective repertoire of emotion regulation strategies, I now come to the main question of the present paper - how to build an effective repertoire of emotion regulation strategies? Existing research on repertoire and ER strategies has focused extensively on the consequences of employing specific, or even a range of emotion regulation strategies, but comparatively less on the explicit ways through which individuals can develop strong regulation strategies. There has been remarkable and worthwhile focus on the journey ahead for the effective repertoire components, but the potential journey one could undertake in order to reach that point of satisfactory regulation can be delved deeper into. And though there are various individual studies examining singular factors that could help develop effective ER, the collective ways which can be explicitly implemented for specifically building a competent emotion regulation repertoire are still to be explored further. Accordingly, the aim of the present work is to discuss and describe the various ways which could help build a good repertoire of emotion regulation strategies - a repertoire that includes a high number of regulation strategies which are temporally and categorically variable.

Studies show that **emotion comprehension** can help improve an individual's actual self-regulatory behaviour. Improvements in the ability to understand different emotions and

recognize different strategies plays a significant role in regulating emotions more proficiently (Lieberman et al., 2007; Sala, Pons, and Molina, 2014). In a study by Pamela Cole and others (2009), preschool-age children's strategy understanding and recognition abilities were examined in relation to actual self-regulation of anger and sadness. In one of the tasks which involved opening a locked box, a positive correlation was found between the strategies recognized for regulating anger, and the persistence showed by the children in trying to open the box [behavioural strategies - the subject engages in action in order to manage the emotion]. A similar relation was also established between the recognition of anger- and sadness-regulation strategies, and the ability of the children to engage in alternative problem-solving. More the number of anger strategies and sadness strategies recognized, greater the alternative solutions attempted by the children in solving the task [reappraisal - the subject assigns different cognitive meanings to the situation in order to manage the emotion]. These findings highlight the importance of emotion comprehension and strategy recognition in the actual regulation of emotions (Cole & Hall, 2008; Cole et al., 2009; Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

Based on these findings, I propose that one way to build an effective repertoire of ER strategies is to keep the broader goal as 'improved emotion and strategy recognition'. Therefore, I now move on to suggest ways to achieve this goal of better emotion and strategy comprehension, and thus, through this accomplishment, achieve the goal of a better ER repertoire. This finding about the importance of strategy comprehension in the actual development of the strategy opens up a wide variety of possibilities through which one can build effective repertoires. Present paper will be taking an arts and humanities perspective, describing how delving into the diverse fields of the arts and the humanities can help enhance our emotion regulation repertoire. Two other possible ways for fostering emotional comprehension include **explicit instructions and guidance** from parents, teachers, and other socialization agents (Mischel & Baker, 1975; Morris et al., 2007), and exposing yourself to

diverse circumstances, that is, not limiting yourself to a single type - of people, of subjects, of opinions, of situations, etc. It is outside the scope of the present paper to elaborate on these approaches, but future research could work to assess these options further, particularly the effects of exposure to diverse circumstances on an individual's ER repertoire.

Though the arts and the humanities encompass various vastly diverse fields including performing arts, visual arts, literature, mass communication, foreign languages, the social sciences, etc., and all might provide potential interventionist strategies for facilitating emotion comprehension, and thus for building ER repertoire, present paper will be focusing on the performing arts and literature sections. The connections between the remaining fields and repertoire building do, nonetheless, pose interesting questions for future research to appraise, and will be briefly mentioned after the discussion of performing arts and literature.

Studies show relations between **performing arts** like music (Moore, 2013) and dance (Punkanen et al., 2014) and effective emotion regulation, but one of the most powerful ways to achieve emotion comprehension and the building of ER repertoire has to do with **theatre and drama**. Participating in pretend plays and dramas can be linked with improved emotional skills, particularly emotional control (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018), emotional comprehension (Richard et al., 2019), and emotion regulation (Slot et al., 2017) in children. Theatre and pretend plays allow children to think about, and embody, how people feel specific emotions, how they react to them, and what consequences they encounter - all of which develops in the actor an understanding of the emotions themselves, and also of the specific strategies employed. Plays allow the simulation and experiencing of real-world emotions in an imaginary context, thus facilitating the learning of emotional skills and strategies in a uniquely safe and encouraging environment. For example, if Maisha is playing the role of a girl who uses suppression to deal with her negative emotions arising from unhealthy familial relationships, and as a result of that, ends up finding it difficult to focus in her classes or do well in any of

her subjects, Maisha may learn to use active behavioural strategies when dealing with relationship conflicts as opposed to passive strategies like suppression in real life. Thus, without having to face the negative consequences of an inappropriate strategy employment in the play, Maisha may learn to use effective ER strategies in specific situations in the real world.

Similar benefits to emotion regulation could unfold by simply watching an emotionally rich play, instead of acting in it. Observational learning and modelling could play significant roles here, facilitating a form of social learning among the spectators simply by watching the actors implement various ER strategies, while at the same time, getting the opportunity to analyse and internalise the effectiveness of distinct strategies in distinct contexts - again, without having to actually face the negative consequences of inappropriate or inadequate strategy implementation. This beautiful short poem, in my opinion, captures the essence and effectiveness of learning something by watching it get embodied:

"Please don't tell me I should hug,

Don't tell me I should care.

Don't tell me just how grand I'd feel

If I just learned to share.

Don't say, "It's all right to cry,"

"Be kind," "Be fair," "Be true."

Just let me see *YOU* do it,

Then I just might do it too."

- by Shel Silverstein

This way of learning by watching the *actions* of those around you is particularly pronounced in toddlers and children, who learn to imitate their parents, guardians, and caretakers very fast

(Bandura et al., 1966). Hence, a potentially neat way of developing ER strategies in children could be to simply expose them to people *using* diverse and beneficial strategies through plays and drama.

There is thus immense scope to teach effective ER via rich drama and theatre by allowing spectators and actors to learn from the consequences, and comprehend various emotion regulation strategies implemented in diverse situations (Caballero & Knupsky, 2019; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Diamond et al., 2019; Goldstein & Lerner, 2018; Richard et al., 2021). For understandable reasons of the importance of early intervention, existing research on the effects of pretend plays-based emotional learning focuses more on pre-school and middle-school aged children. More research could be done on other age populations to further examine their global effects on the building of a competent ER repertoire. In order to derive more information about the long-term effects of participating in plays and drama, a longitudinal study could be conducted, following the ER development of students studying acting and theatre in college, assessing the change in their ER abilities over the course of their acting careers. This could also help provide insight into the specific kinds of plays that prove to be more effective when it comes to the development of ER strategies. Similarly, a study could be conducted with theatre enthusiasts as subjects, in order to examine the effects of simply watching and appreciating the performing arts on people's emotion regulation skills, and repertoire building.

Next, the field of **literature** within the arts and humanities could also provide impressive scope for advancing the development of ER repertoire. Reading about different emotions and the mechanisms with which emotions operate explicitly leads to emotion comprehension. And emotion comprehension, as discussed above, is linked with better repertoire building and emotion regulation. Literature is full with writings rich in emotions and feelings - from Shakespeare to Jane Austen, exploring the world of literature could potentially

elevate an individual's emotional comprehension abilities, and thus their repertoire development and ER competencies. Further, guided reading, with a teacher or an instructor, which is accompanied by simultaneous discussions of the way different emotions are portrayed, could lead to an even more impressive ER development, allowing individuals to learn through the collaborative conversations on emotions (Denham et al., 2007; Richard et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017).

Another potentially interesting endeavour could be to combine the two emotionally beneficial fields of theatre and literature reading in order to record their collective effects on ER abilities of individuals. For example, an experiment may be designed involving high school students to read, and later enact the same piece of emotionally-rich work, to assess their combined impact on ER repertoire development. This could further be compared with results in 2 control groups involving only reading and only enacting respectively.

Within the arts and the humanities, other potential ways for building repertoires of ER strategies include (a) involvement in language-related activities like **expressive writing** (Niles et al., 2016), (b) verbal skill development through activities involving **vocabulary building** (Cutting & Dunn, 1999), (c) **visual arts**, involving expression of emotions and feelings through various art forms, leading to better comprehension and awareness of diverse emotions (Winston et al., 1995), and (d) **mass communication and media** including advertisements, TV shows, etc. (Bartsch et al., 2008). Future research could not only explore these fields individually from an ER repertoire building perspective, but also attempt to modulate an arts and humanities model for effective ER repertoire development. Such a model could have far-reaching benefits in various institutions, particularly in schools and colleges.

The fields in arts and humanities are copiously diverse - from visual and performing arts to literature and media studies, there is a lot to explore and learn from. There has, however, been a gradual fall in the importance placed on these fields. For example, the public and private

funding for the humanities declined globally, from roughly $3.5 billion in granted awards in 2009 to $1.5 billion in granted awards in 2012 (Halevi et al., 2013). All the findings and suggestions presented in this paper highlight not only some potentially practical and implementable ways to build an individual's emotion regulation repertoire of strategies, but also reasons to help break the substandard treatment given to the arts and the humanities, despite their immensely essential benefits to human advancement. It's time we recognized the wide-ranging and global benefits of exploring these incredibly diverse, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally engaging fields, and encourage people to delve into these worthwhile subjects more.

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