

## The Effect of Ambivalence over Emotional Expression on Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Well-being

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### ABSTRACT

The focus of theory and research on emotion regulation has shifted from emphasizing the adaptiveness of specific regulatory strategies to flexible emotion regulation in accord to situational demands. It is important to consider the role of attitudes about emotional expression in studying the contribution of flexible emotion regulation to psychological wellbeing. To test this idea, using the process model of flexible regulation (Bonanno & Burton, 2013), this study aims to investigate the effect of ambivalence over emotional expression on expressive flexibility and psychological wellbeing. A sample of n=73 young adults (n=30 males, n=43 females) were chosen from South India to participate in two phases of the study. In phase 1, the participants responded to questionnaires that measured ambivalence over emotional expression and psychological wellbeing. In phase 2, the participants undertook the Expressive Flexibility task, in which they were instructed to up- and down- regulate their emotional facial expressions. The results of the study indicated that Ambivalence over Emotional Expression was a strong negative predictor of Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing. Additionally, Expressive Flexibility was found to be a strong positive predictor of Psychological Wellbeing. The findings are discussed within the expressive flexibility framework. The methodological limitations and avenues for future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** *Expressive Flexibility, Psychological Wellbeing, Ambivalence over Emotional Expression.*

Contemporary understanding of emotion regulation emanated from interpretations of ego defense mechanisms (Freud, 1959), psychological distress and coping strategies (Lazarus, 1966), developmental attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), and the emotion theory (Frijda, 1986). The term “emotion regulation” is ambiguous, posing a vague discernment between regulation by emotions, and regulation of emotions (Gross, 2007). Nevertheless, if the fundamental task of emotions is to integrate response systems so as to achieve optimal regulation (Levenson, 1999), then emotion regulation is characteristically a set of diverse processes by which emotion itself is regulated (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotion

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regulation may be intentional or automatic, which alleviates, intensifies, prolongs or curtails emotion in relation to other fundamental classes of mental operations, such as motivation or goals of the individual (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotion regulation also moderates emotion response factors such as expressivity, in the face of intense emotional experience and physiological reactions (Thompson, 1994). People may choose to regulate positive or negative emotions, by either increasing or decreasing them, predominantly focusing on experiential and behavioral aspects of emotion (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006).

### ***Conceptual Foundations of Emotion Regulatory Strategies***

Emotion regulation has been deliberated as a technique of influencing the onset, intensity, and/or duration of an emotional experience (Gross & Thompson, 2007). A crucial proposition by Gross (1998), the process model of emotion, differentiates between emotion regulation strategies based on the point in the emotion-generative process in which they imposed their significant impact. The clusters of strategies that are utilized ahead of emotion generation are termed “antecedent-focused” (e.g., reappraisal) and discordantly, the cluster of strategies utilized after emotion generation is termed “response-focused” (e.g., suppression). He conceptualized that, “because emotions are multicomponential processes that unfold over time, emotion regulation involves changes in emotion dynamics”. Emotion dynamics indicate the ways in which emotion is regulated (e.g., reappraisal or expressive suppression) (Gross, 1998). The process model of emotion invoked an explosion of studies that aimed at establishing the mechanisms, effectiveness, and most importantly implications for psychopathology of different strategies, which led to the conceptualization that antecedent-focused strategies were putatively adaptive and response-focused strategies were putatively maladaptive (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweiser, 2010; Sheppes & Gross, 2011). Contrastingly, a host of studies that followed verified the adaptive function of response-focused strategies and maladaptive function of antecedent-focused strategies (Adler & Matthews, 1994; Gross & John, 2003; Richards & Gross, 2000; Troy, Mauss, & Shallcross, 2013). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, emotion research transited into studying emotion regulation as accommodating to contextual demands. Eventually, the focus of research pivoted from substantiating the consistent efficacy of certain regulatory strategies to a more flexible operation of a combination of strategies.

### ***Expressive Flexibility: A novel endeavor***

Is expression or suppression of emotions more beneficial? Decades of extensive psychological research have consistently and inadvertently favored the salutary aspects of emotional expression. However, in the past few years, the focus of emotion research has evolved into challenging the fallacy of uniform efficacy: the assumption that particular regulatory strategies are consistently beneficial or destructive. Therefore, both expressing and suppressing emotions can be adaptive, while simultaneously exerting some serious cost, when used indiscriminately (Aldao, 2013; Bonanno, 2001; Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004). Emotions are not unidimensional phenomena; they are expressed via diverse response channels, which includes emotional experience, expression and physiology, each with distinct functions and specific regulatory strategies. The ability to both up-regulate, which is to enhance and down-regulate, which is to suppress one’s own facial expressions could be regarded as a behavioral measure of emotion regulation flexibility. The appropriate usage of a variety of emotion regulation strategies has been identified as an important benefactor to psychological health (Bonanno et al., 2004; Cheng, 2001; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

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### ***Salience of Expressive Flexibility***

Expression of emotions serves an array of incontrovertible beneficial functions such as conveying and regulating internal status, signaling interpersonal behavioral intentions (Ekman, 1983, 1993; Ekman & Davidson, 1993; Izard, 1990; Keltner, 1995; Zajonc, Murphy & Inglehart, 1989) and modeling by producing complementary emotional expressions in dyadic arrangements (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Keltner & Kring, 1998). Contrastingly, it has also been proved that chronic expression of emotions could be detrimental. For instance, chronic expression of negative emotion, particularly anger is a threat to developing cardiovascular disease (Adler & Matthews, 1994) and recent research concerning survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Bonanno, Colak, Keltner, Shiota, Papa, & Nole, 2007) revealed that in certain contexts, even expressing positive emotion could be maladaptive.

Similarly, although suppression of emotional expression is primarily associated with greater experience of negative emotion, decreased wellbeing, substandard memory for emotional events, increased blood pressure, disrupted communication pattern, diminished rapport and willingness to affiliate (Butler, Egloff, Wilhelm, Smith, Erickson, & Gross, 2003; Gross & John, 2003; Richards & Gross, 2000), it has been proved to be advantageous in certain other situations. The ability to conceal one's feelings is useful in multiple social situations and this idea is schemed along with evolutionary deliberation of the pervasiveness and vitality of deception (de Waal, 1989; Trivers, 1985). In adverse conditions, modulation of display of negative emotions can nurture recovery of optimal functioning (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997), help maintain and augment social connections (Coyne, 1976; Harber & Pennebaker, 1992), and promote close interpersonal relationships (Levenson & Gottman, 1983).

This substantiation posits that successful adaptation is sustained by the ability to both enhance and suppress emotional expression in accord with situational demands. Recently, Bonanno et al., (2004) developed a within-subjects experimental paradigm to measure expressive flexibility (EF), defined as the ability to both enhance and suppress emotions. Flexibility in emotion regulation has been established as an influential promoter of psychological health (Kashdan & Rotternberg, 2010).

### ***Attitudes about Emotional Expression***

Within the context of expressive flexibility, it is important to examine the role of ambivalence over emotional expression. The concept of "ambivalence" denotes "rapidly changing or simultaneous intense and opposing emotional feelings towards an object" (Raulin, 1984 as cited in King, 1998, p. 753). King and Emmons (1990) stipulated that ambivalence over emotional expression reflects the conflict over one's manner of expression, which is the conflict between an individual's need to be expressive or inexpressive in accord with the obligations of the situation and the desire to not display subjective emotions. This inner ambivalence regarding display of emotions is highly stressful and considered as a source of dysfunctional cognitive mechanisms. Such disruptive cognitive mechanisms pose numerous difficulties in the communication of emotional needs and they can instigate psychological distress (King & Emmons, 1990). It is important to note that this construct greatly differs from alexithymia, because the individual is aware of the emotional conflict (Lesser, 1982).

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### *Theoretical Perspectives*

**Flexible Regulation of Emotion** Bonanno and Burton (2013) propose three sequential components of regulatory flexibility that vary in ability and propensity namely context sensitivity, regulatory repertoire, and responsiveness to feedback. Sensitivity to context reflects the ability to perceive intruding demands from the situation and employ regulatory strategies that favor it. In order to flexibly regulate one's emotions, it is absolutely necessary to identify salient emotional features of various situations. The regulatory repertoire component addresses the functional benefit of a diverse regulatory repository from which individuals could choose to efficiently regulate emotions in dynamic situations. The last component of flexible regulation, responsiveness to feedback, is the ability to monitor the efficacy of regulatory strategies and readjust regulatory efforts accordingly (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). All three components of expressive flexibility must work in harmony in order to exhibit flexible emotion regulation.

**Ambivalence over Emotional Expression** Pennebaker (1985) initially proposed that lack of emotional expression might not be pathological in itself. He suggested that lack of emotional expression combined with the desire to express emotion is detrimental to both physical and psychological wellbeing (Pennebaker, 1985). He coined the term "active inhibition", which refers to intentionally preventing oneself from desired course of action. Such active inhibition resulted in psychological distress (Pennebaker & Hoover, 1986; Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987). Similarly, Emmons (1986) postulated *personal strivings*, which denotes "what a person is characteristically trying to do", or goals that motivate individuals' behaviors (Emmons, 1986). Emotion-related personal strivings such as "I must not let my emotions take over" and "I must let my anger out before it all builds up inside me" implied ambivalence over emotional expression resulting in low wellbeing. This could be traced back to a universal cultural conflict that emotional expression is healthy vs. emotional expression implies vulnerability (Emmons 1986; Emmons & King, 1988).

Attitudes about emotional expression may overcharge the decision to enhance or suppress the expression of emotions, stunting the development of expressive flexibility. On the other hand, even for individuals high in expressive flexibility, ambivalence over emotional expression may provoke uncertainty about how to act in a particular situation, disrupting their psychological wellbeing.

### *Statement of the problem*

The current investigation is aimed at studying the effect of ambivalence over emotional expression on expressive flexibility and psychological wellbeing. Expressive flexibility has been postulated as having a strong influence on psychological wellbeing. However, even individuals with high expressive flexibility skills may be hindered from fully benefiting from it, due to ambivalence over emotional expression. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the influence of such ambivalence on expressive flexibility to procure a holistic understanding of the association between optimal emotion regulation and psychological wellbeing.

### *Rationale of the study*

This study intends to provide insight into the mechanisms underlying Expressive Flexibility, which is a novel and emerging area of research in emotion regulation. Inflexible emotion regulation could impose a vulnerability to developing psychopathology; therefore an elaborate understanding of the mechanism would be useful in structuring therapeutic interventions.

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### ***Objectives of the study***

This study aims to explore the relationship between ambivalence over emotional expression, expressive flexibility and psychological wellbeing.

### ***Hypotheses of the study***

Hypothesis 1 – Ambivalence over emotional expression will predict Expressive Flexibility.

Hypothesis 2 – Expressive Flexibility will predict Psychological Wellbeing.

Hypothesis 3 - Ambivalence over emotional expression will predict Psychological Wellbeing.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The review of literature has been extensively searched through various databases such as EBSICO, PROQUEST, GOOGLE SCHOLAR, PUBMED, ELSEVIER, FRONTIERS, etc.

### ***Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing***

The pioneering study attempted to develop a within-subjects paradigm to explore expressive flexibility, endorsing the hypothesis that appropriate adaptation is driven by the ability to flexibly suppress or enhance expression of emotions according to situational demands. Participants' performance in a laboratory when presented with three conditions; enhancement and suppression of emotional expression, and normal response on different tasks was investigated as a prospective predictor of their adjustment across the initial two years of college, post September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. Participants with better expressive flexibility evidenced less distress by the end of second year, under controlled cognitive resources and baseline initial distress. Shortfalls in memory were observed for both enhancement and suppression tasks, suggesting that both of these processes mandate cognitive resources (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004).

Recently, Westphal, Seivert and Bonanno (2010) extended the study by demonstrating the stability of expressive flexibility over three years. They replicated the interrelation between positive adjustment and expressive flexibility using an objective measure rather than completely relying on self-reports by the participants. Additionally, they established that the positive correlation between adjustment and expressive flexibility was specifically rewarding during periods of extreme and accumulated life stress, when expressive flexibility was studied in the context of immediate threat (Westphal, Seivert, & Bonanno, 2010).

Following empirical substantiation of the contribution of expressive flexibility to dealing with distress, its association with psychopathology has been investigated. Disorders like PTSD and Depression were correlated with low expressive enhancement ability, consequently causing greater symptom severity in both these conditions (Rodin et al., 2017). Such findings necessitate the inclusion of expressive flexibility in therapeutic interventions designed to address disorders that are emotion-anchored, along with being triggered and perpetuated by stress. Importantly, on assessing the differential significance of roles of context sensitivity and feedback sensitivity in symptom of anxiety and depression, it was observed that contextual appraisal was merely a compensatory skill. Feedback sensitivity is crucial to experiencing the adaptive outcomes associated with emotion regulation flexibility (Wallace et al., 2017).

### ***Ambivalence over Emotional Expression and Wellbeing***

Ambivalence over emotional expression can be geared towards both negative and positive emotions. Such ambivalence has formerly been regarded as a crucial mediator between

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individuals' emotional styles and both their psychological and physical health, and has been long associated with psychological distress. Ambivalence over emotional expression has been negatively correlated with measures of psychological wellbeing such as self-esteem and life satisfaction. Congruently, it was positively correlated with depression, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and daily negative affect (King & Emmons, 1990). Barr, Kahn and Schneider (2008) investigated the association between comfort with emotional expression, emotional expression and psychological distress. Results revealed that greater ambivalence was linked to higher distress and anxiety, which negatively affect psychological wellbeing (Barr, Kahn, & Schneider, 2008). Ambivalence over emotional expression was found to be mediating the depressive symptoms in dependent individuals with high self-criticism (Mongrain & Zuroff, 1993). Furthermore, lower psychological wellbeing was established in ambivalent rheumatoid arthritis patients and their spouses owing to faulty coping strategies such as distancing (Tucker, Winkelman, Katz, Bermas, 1999). Recently, the prevalence of a greater ambivalence over emotional expression among a clinical sample of participants with depression has been evidenced (Brockmeyer et al., 2013). Additionally, ambivalence over emotional expression was found to be associated with marital satisfaction, establishing its applications in interpersonal relationships as well (King, 1993). In a study to examine the emotion regulation of cancer patients and their caregivers, Porter, Keefe, Lipkus, and Hurwitz (2005), evidenced that greater ambivalence over emotional expression accounted for poorer pain behavior and quality of life (Porter et al., 2005). Lastly, ambivalence over expressing emotions also influenced the ability to read emotions of others greatly affecting the ability to form and sustain social relationships (King, 1988).

The confluence of this literature suggests the influence of greater expressive flexibility and lesser ambivalence over emotional expression on psychological wellbeing. Being ambivalent about expressing emotions is a major hindrance in fully exploiting expressive flexibility skills and could therefore hamper its positive effects on psychological wellbeing.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Sample***

The target participants for the study were chosen by purposive sampling method. The sample comprised of 73 Young adults (18-25 years; 30 males and 43 females). The sample was drawn from Chennai and Bangalore.

#### ***Inclusion Criteria***

Young adults aged 18-25 years were included in the study.

#### ***Exclusion Criteria***

Individuals with history of trauma or any chronic physical/psychological illness or any kind of loss or bereavement were excluded from the study.

#### ***Operational definitions***

Expressive Flexibility was operationalized as the ability to enhance and suppress emotional expression as rated by observers.

Psychological Wellbeing was operationalized as the total score obtained in Ryff's scales of psychological wellbeing.

Ambivalence over Emotional Expression was operationalized as the total score obtained from Ambivalence over Emotional Expression Questionnaire.

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## **Research design**

Experimental research strategy with within-subjects design was adopted to carry out the expressive flexibility task.

## **Tools used**

1. **Ambivalence Over Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire (AEQ; King & Emmons, 1990).** The AEQ is a 28-item self-report measure, which represents attitudes about expressing emotions. The questionnaire contains a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*I never feel this way*) to 5 (*I frequently feel this way*) wherein higher scores indicate higher ambivalence. The alpha reliability coefficient of the AEQ was found to be .89. Exploratory factor analysis gave rise to two factors, one for negative emotion and the other for positive emotion. A subsequent confirmatory analysis was performed to substantiate the results of exploratory factor analysis. Cluster analysis revealed high reliability ( $\alpha = .87$  for positive emotion;  $\alpha = .77$  for negative emotion) for both clusters. Additionally, two clusters themselves were highly correlated ( $r = .71$ ) (King & Emmons, 1990).
2. **Ryff's Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 1998).** The Scales of Psychological Wellbeing is an 84-item inventory that consists of a series of statements, which indicate six areas of psychological wellbeing such as positive relations with others (items 6, 13, 16), self-acceptance (items 1, 2, 5), autonomy (15, 17, 18), personal growth (items 11, 12, 14), environmental mastery (items 4, 8, 9) and purpose in life (items 3, 7, 10). Respondents rate the statements based on the extent to which they agree or disagree with them on a scale of 1 to 6, wherein 1 reflects strong disagreement and 6 reflects strong agreement. The items scored reversely are 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 15, and 16. Psychological wellbeing is described as the sum of all subscales. The internal consistency, measured by Cronbach Alpha for each subscale is moderate ( $\alpha = .52$  for self-acceptance;  $\alpha = .56$  for positive relations with others;  $\alpha = .37$  for autonomy;  $\alpha = .49$  for environmental mastery;  $\alpha = .33$  for purpose in life;  $\alpha = .40$  for personal growth).
3. **International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 2008).** A standardized collection of pictures designed particularly for studying emotion that has been extensively used in psychological research. The IAPS was developed by National Institute of Mental Health by the Center for Emotion and Attention at the University of Florida. The IAPS comprises of 956 color photographs of ranging from day-to-day objects and scenes such as household furniture to extremely rare or unusual scenes such as mutilated bodies. The Indian ratings for Valence, Arousal and Dominance were 1.80 - 7.96, 4.16 - 6.93 and 3.85 - 6.36 respectively.

## **Procedure**

### **Phase 1**

*Filling out Questionnaires:* Participants responded to Ambivalence over Emotional Expression Questionnaire and Ryff's Scales of Psychological Wellbeing.

### **Phase 2**

*Expressive Flexibility Task:* For the expressive regulation task, the participants were seated facing a computer. Participants were given brief instructions about how to interact with the software. Digitized picture stimuli were selected from International Affective Picture System and Indian norms were followed to balance stimuli for valence and arousal (Lang, Bradley, &

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Cuthbert, 1995). Within each block, each stimulus was presented for ten seconds, with four seconds between stimuli. A practice session was included in the beginning, in which the participants were presented with random blocks of positive or negative stimuli. Following each block they were to rate the extent to which they felt negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger etc.) or positive emotions (e.g., happiness, amusement etc.) on a scale of 1 (no emotion) to 5 (extreme emotion).

The instructions emphasized that when the experiment began, the computer would (a) sometimes ask the participants to enhance their emotional expression so the observer watching them could identify their emotion with ease, (b) sometimes ask the participants to suppress their emotional expression so the observer watching them could not identify their emotion with ease, and (c) sometimes notify the participants to express their emotion as they would naturally.

The enhancement condition will be described as follows:

Shortly, you will be presented with a set of pictures. Please view each image carefully and while doing so try your best to **EXPRESS** as fully as possible the emotions you experience. It is absolutely essential for the purpose of the study that you best communicate your feeling through facial expressions. So please ensure that you express your emotions in such a way that the observers viewing you will be **ABLE** to identify your feeling accurately without much effort. Furthermore, after you have observed each image, you will have to rate the degree of emotions you felt in response to the images.

The suppression condition will be described as follows:

Shortly, you will be presented with a set of pictures. Please view each image carefully and while doing so try your best to **SUPPRESS** as fully as possible any expression of emotions you experience. It is absolutely essential for the purpose of the study that you strictly conceal any sort of emotional expression. So please ensure that you suppress your emotions in such a way that the observers viewing you will be **UNABLE** to identify your feeling accurately. Furthermore, after you have observed each image, you will have to rate the degree of emotions you felt in response to the images.

*The normal expression (control) condition will be described as follows:*

Shortly, you will be presented with a set of pictures. Please view each image carefully and while doing so express the emotions you experience as you would **NATURALLY**. Furthermore, you will have to rate the degree of emotions you felt in response to the images.

Participants was informed that the appropriate instruction paragraph would precede each block of stimuli followed by emotion ratings. Every condition began with a trial image. The sequencing of the conditions were randomized to minimize observer bias.

### ***Observer Ratings of Emotional Expression***

Three masters-level students blind to the goals and hypotheses of the study, and possessing almost identical emotion recognition abilities viewed videotapes of participants' performance of emotional expression. Observers used the same emotion rating scale as the participants. The observers were unaware of the participants' instructions for any given block.

### ***Data analysis***

Karl Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to understand the relationship between expressive flexibility and psychological well-being. Intra-class correlation coefficient was used to substantiate raters.

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Repeated measures of ANOVA was used to analyze emotion ratings, which would support the validity of expression manipulation. A 2x3x2 repeated measures ANOVA was used to compute interaction effect of rating source (participant, observer), expression conditions (enhancement, suppression, control), and stimulus valence (positive, negative).

Furthermore, a regression analysis was carried out to understand the effect of ambivalence over emotional expression on expressive flexibility and psychological wellbeing.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

**Ethical Procedure.** The study followed the APA format of ethical consideration.

**Risks Involved.** The participants were informed of the possible risk of emotional disturbances during or post the participation in the study.

**Consent form.** The participants were given a consent form, which included the details about the study and the author's contact information before participating in the research. A copy of the consent form was given to the participants.

**Sharing of results.** The results of the study were shared with the participants upon request.

**Harming.** No participant was harmed during this study.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Sample Characteristics

*Table 1 Mean Age of the Sample*

	Mean	SD
Age	21.3	.86

The sample consisted of n=73 Young Adults (18-25 years, n = 30 males; n= 43 females), drawn from Chennai and Bangalore using purposive sampling technique. The mean age of the sample was found to be 21.3 years.

*Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviations on the measures of Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility, and Psychological Wellbeing.*

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Ambivalence over Emotional Expression	73	87.5	88	73	5.8
Expressive Flexibility	73	2.6	2.5	1.9	.74
Psychological Wellbeing	73	293.2	300	287	7.8

#### Reliability Statistics

*Table 3 Intraclass Correlation Coefficient of Observer Ratings*

	Intraclass Correlation Coefficient
Observer Ratings	.846**

\*\*p<0.01

Initially, the reliability of observer ratings was assessed using Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC=. 846), which was found to be strongly significant. Two-way mixed model was adopted because people effects are random, whereas the measure effect is fixed. Furthermore, absolute agreement definition was employed in explaining the Intraclass correlation.

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### Manipulation Check

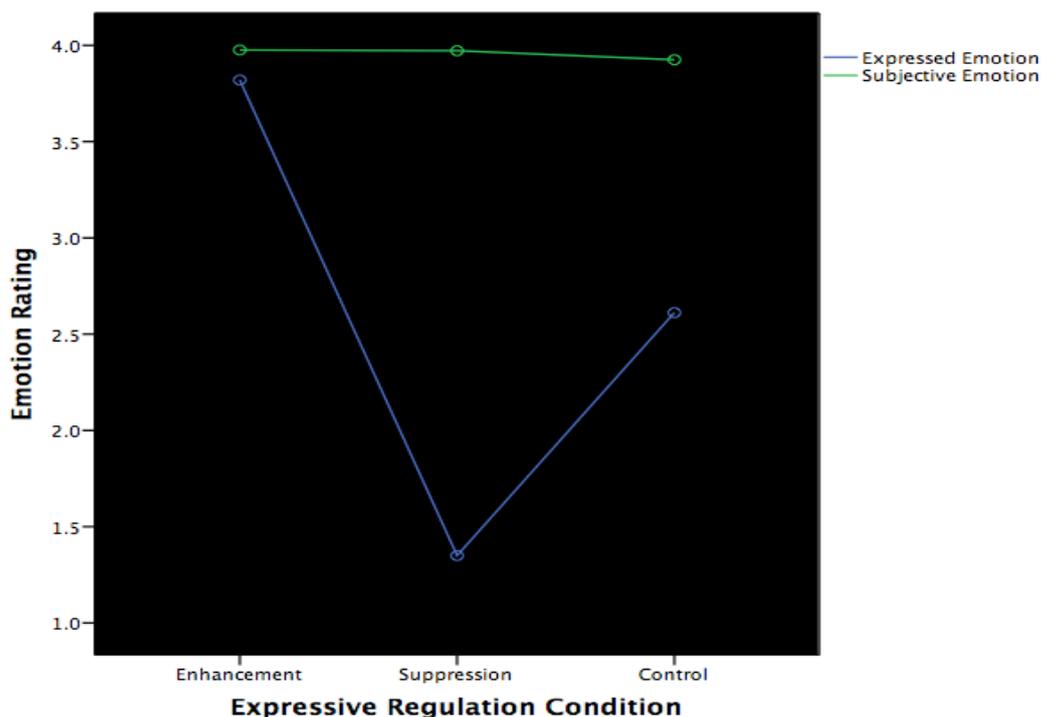


Fig. 1. Participants' ratings of their own (subjective) emotion and observers' ratings of emotion expressed by participants in the three expressive regulation conditions. Higher ratings indicate greater emotion.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of manipulation, a 2x3x2 repeated measures ANOVA for rating source (observer, participant), expression regulation condition (enhancement, suppression, control), and stimulus valence (positive, negative) was carried out. The source x expression regulation interaction was significant ( $F(2,70) = 335.9, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that the participants reported experiencing similar levels of emotion across different experiment conditions whereas the observer rated different levels of emotional expression in each expression regulation condition. Furthermore, such difference was confirmed by three post-hoc t-tests that compare the observer ratings of expressed emotions and participant rating of experienced emotions. In the enhancement condition ( $t(146) = 10.12, p < .05$ ), suppression condition ( $t(146) = 45.22, p < .01$ ), and control condition ( $t(146) = 20.55, p < .01$ ), participants reported experiencing higher levels of emotion in comparison to observer ratings of expressed emotion. This finding is in line with Bonanno et al., (2004)'s study.

**Table 4 Comparison of Observer Ratings of Expressed Emotion**

	Expressive Regulation Condition					
	Enhancement		Suppression		Control	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Current Study	3.8	.59	1.3	.22	2.6	.43
Bonanno et al., 2004	4.27	1.20	1.54	.53	2.73	1.12

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A comparison of means was carried out between the current study and the findings from Bonanno et al., (2004). The ratings of emotion expression were lower in all regulation conditions. Furthermore, the current study possesses small standard deviations. Such findings indicate restricted range and variability in comparison to Bonanno et al., (2004)'s study.

**Table 5 Differences in Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological wellbeing by Gender**

	Ambivalence over Emotional Expression				Expressive Flexibility				Psychological Wellbeing			
	M	SD	N	t	M	SD	N	t	M	SD	N	t
Male	84.2	21.45	30	-1.14	2.89	.79	30	3*	302.33	7.02	30	1.67
Female	89.9	20.31	43		2.36	.62	43		286.74	6.17	43	

\* $p < .05$

A set of t-tests was conducted to assess gender differences in Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological wellbeing. Only Expressive Flexibility ability differed significantly among males and females ( $t(53) = 3, p < .05$ ). Men exhibited better Expressive Flexibility ability ( $M=2.89, SD=.79$ ) in comparison to women ( $M=2.36, SD=.62$ ).

**Table 6 Differences in Enhancement Ability and Suppression Ability by Gender**

	N	Enhancement Ability			Suppression Ability		
		M	SD	t	M	SD	t
Male	30	1.71	.98	4.45**	1.17	.40	-2.09*
Female	43	.99	.48		1.34	.42	

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

To further understand the gender effects on Expressive Flexibility, a post-hoc t-test was conducted to understand which Expressive Regulation Ability differed significantly among men and women. The findings suggest that men ( $M=1.71, SD=.98$ ) possess a better enhancement ability than women ( $M=.99, SD=.48$ ),  $t(70)=4.45, p < .01$ . This finding is somewhat contrary to the popular cultural explanation of emotional expressivity. Additionally, it should also be noted that men ( $M=1.17, SD=.40$ ) possessed a better suppression ability in comparison to women ( $M=1.34, SD=.42$ ),  $t(64.5)=-2.09, p < .05$ . Together, these results suggest that men possess better expressive flexibility ability than women.

**Table 7 Correlation Coefficients between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing**

Measures	Psychological Wellbeing (r)
Ambivalence over Emotional Expression	-.78**
Expressive Flexibility	.50**

\*\* $p < .01$

A Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted to understand the relationship between all variables in the study. A strong negative correlation was observed between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression and Psychological Wellbeing,  $r=-.78, p < .01$ , suggesting that Psychological wellbeing is indirectly proportional to Ambivalence over Emotional

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Expression. Consequently, a strong positive correlation was observed between Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing,  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ . This suggests a directly proportional relationship between Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing. However, the direction of influence cannot be determined.

### Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: Ambivalence over Emotional Expression will predict Expressive Flexibility

**Table 8 Regression Analysis of Ambivalence over Emotional Expression on Expressive Flexibility**

Predictor	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Ambivalence over Emotional Expression	-.66	-7.40	.43	54.78**

\*\* $p < .01$

The first hypothesis was tested with linear regression method. This hypothesis was strongly supported. Ambivalence over Emotional Expression accounted for 43% of the variance ( $R^2 = .43$ ,  $F(1,70) = 54.78$ ). Additionally, the results also suggest it is a strong negative predictor of Expressive Flexibility. Ambivalence over Emotional Expression compromises individuals' ability to flexibly regulate emotional expression.

Hypothesis 2: Expressive Flexibility will predict Psychological Wellbeing

**Table 9 Regression Analysis of Expressive Flexibility on Psychological Wellbeing**

Predictor	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Expressive Flexibility	-.50	4.86	.24	23.62**

\*\* $p < .01$

The second hypothesis was tested with linear regression method. This hypothesis was also strongly supported. Expressive Flexibility accounted for 24% of the variance ( $R^2 = .24$ ,  $F(1,70) = 23.62$ ). Additionally, the results also suggest that it is a strong positive predictor of Psychological Wellbeing ( $\beta = .50$ ,  $t(73) = 4.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Expressive Flexibility will improve positive Psychological Wellbeing to a significant extent.

Hypothesis 3: Ambivalence over Emotional Expression will predict Psychological Wellbeing

**Table 10 Regression Analysis of Ambivalence over Emotional Expression on Psychological Wellbeing**

Predictor	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	R <sup>2</sup>	F
Ambivalence over Emotional Expression	-.78	-10.55	.61	111.31**

\*\* $p < .01$

The third hypothesis was tested separately with linear regression method to avoid collinearity effects. This hypothesis was also strongly supported. Ambivalence over Emotional Expression accounted for 61% of the variance ( $R^2 = .61$ ,  $F(1,70) = 111.31$ ). Additionally, the results also suggest that it is a strong negative predictor of Psychological Wellbeing ( $\beta = -.78$ ,  $t(73) = -10.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding also displays that Ambivalence is a stronger predictor of Psychological Wellbeing in comparison to Expressive Flexibility.

## **DISCUSSION**

The primary purpose of the study was to examine the relations among Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing among Young Adults. The results offer considerable amount of understanding pertaining to the predictive ability of different constructs. Gender effects in Expressive Flexibility were observed. Such gender-related variations in emotional expression studies are common, owing to the cultural implications. Gender studies suggest that emotional differences between men and women are a result of socialized gender roles based on cultural norms rather than biological or skill-based differences (Malatesta & Haviland, 1982; McRae, Oschner, Mauss, Gabrieli, & Gross, 2008). Popular cultural evidence suggests that women are more expressive than men (Brody 1996; Guerrero & Reiter, 1998). A plethora of studies suggest that such expressional differences are influenced by both the kind of emotion and situational demands (Shields, 1995; Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000). However, in the current study men possessed better enhancement ability in comparison to women. There could be two implications to this finding. Firstly it could suggest a possible alteration in the Indian cultural expectations regarding emotional expression of men and women. However, a larger sample size is required to generalize such far-fetched inferences. Secondly, complete usage of expressive regulation ability is dependent on lower ambivalence. A major contributor to better Expression Regulation is Ambivalence over Emotional Expression. Therefore, because men also possessed lower ambivalence over emotional expression, expressive regulation ability is fully operable. Contrastingly, even if women did possess better expressive flexibility, conflictual attitude regarding emotional expression could obstruct its functionality. Furthermore, the mere possession of better enhancement ability may not guarantee the liberal application of such a regulatory strategy in vivo. Additionally, there could be some amount of influence of gender inequality in Indian patriarchal system, in which women have been sidelined while at the same time being modern Indian women, they could be motivated to rise up to equal levels with men. This could also influence the increased Ambivalence over Emotional Expression in women.

Alternatively, men possessed better suppression ability in comparison to women. This finding is in line with previous literature that men are able to better control emotional expression (Brody 1996; Brody & Hall, 1993). The confluence of these two findings suggests that men have better Expressive Flexibility than women. Interestingly, men also had higher Psychological Wellbeing than women, which is in line with earlier studies. A vast number of studies in emotion regulation suggests that emotional expression is strongly influenced by the nature of emotions (i.e., positive or negative) and the context (Hall, 1978; Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Future studies could focus on such effects while analyzing emotional expressiveness.

The expressive regulation paradigm was adopted from Bonanno et al., (2004). The results of three expressive regulation conditions yielded results in the similar direction. However, the average observer ratings of emotion in the current study was lesser than those obtained in Bonanno et al., (2004)'s study. This could be attributed to restriction in sample size and emotional expressiveness differences among Western and Eastern participants and raters (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989).

The current study presented a strong association between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing. It is essential to note that

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Psychological Wellbeing in the current study explicitly indicates positive human health comprising of factors like Positive relations with others, Personal Growth, Purpose in Life etc. rather than the prevailing “absence of illness” criteria adopted in previous studies (Bonanno et al., 2004; Westphal, Seivert, & Bonanno, 2010). This proposition was intentionally chosen to understand the interaction of Ambivalence over Emotional Expression and Expressive Flexibility with positive aspects of health.

Expressive Flexibility was observed to be a strong positive predictor of Psychological Wellbeing. Expressive Flexibility has been positively associated with better coping and negatively associated with Depression, Anxiety and PTSD (Barr, Kahn, & Schneider, 2008; Wallace et al., 2017). This study suggests that Expressive Flexibility could help in adapting to all kinds of emotion provoking situations, resulting in better outcomes in such situations, leading to fewer negative interactions. This would promote better relationships and confidence in dealing with diverse situations improving the individuals’ Autonomy, Purpose in Life etc. Therefore, Expressive Flexibility ability could also catalyze attempts to attain self-actualization (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Furthermore, Ambivalence over Emotional Expression was a strong negative predictor of Expressive Flexibility. It is fair to assume that inner conflict regarding emotional expression could occur in ambiguous situations or when individuals need to decide for themselves an appropriate regulatory strategy to use. However, in the current study, participants were presented with appropriate instructions regarding which regulatory strategy to employ. Nevertheless, individuals high in ambivalence did not exhibit better expressive flexibility. Such a finding delineates the strength of conflicting intrapersonal impulses (i.e., high ambivalence) over direct instructions (i.e., instructions provided during the experimental task) pertaining to the use of specific emotion regulatory strategies.

Expressive Flexibility is comprised of context sensitivity (i.e., ability to attend to situational cues), a repertoire of regulatory strategies and responsiveness to feedback (internal physiological feedback or external social feedback). Intrapersonal conflict regarding emotional expressiveness could impede an individual’s ability to attend to environmental cues. Situational cues are highly essential in choosing an appropriate emotion regulatory strategy that might be beneficial in that particular context. Consequently, monitoring the efficacy of chosen regulatory strategy and altering when necessary would also be compromised, because of conflict concerning emotional expression. For example, even if an individual with high ambivalence did manage to express emotions in the face of distress, the efficacy of this emotion regulatory strategy would be difficult to determine owing to the ongoing conflict regarding emotional expression itself. Therefore, even if the chosen emotion regulation method is not sufficiently beneficial in that particular situation, the individual could fail to modify it, resulting in maladaptive patterns of emotional regulation. Lastly, a large repertoire of emotion regulation strategies is the result of evaluating the efficacy of different regulatory strategies in different situations. It is important to note that situational demands decide whether or not any emotion regulation strategy is adaptive (Aldao, 2013; Sheppes et al., 2012). Ambivalence over emotional expression could affect emotion regulation repertoire in two ways. Firstly, as previously mentioned, higher ambivalence could restrict the understanding of contextual cues, which could result in the inability to choose the correct regulation strategy for different situations. Secondly, higher ambivalence could also obstruct an individual’s ability to evaluate the efficacy of a chosen regulatory strategy, which

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could lead to inadvertent use of a single regulatory strategy across all situations. Consistent usage of a single emotion regulation method could curtail the development of emotion regulation repertoire, which could result in non-availability of adaptive regulatory strategies for specific situations.

As observed in the current study, Ambivalence also serves as a strong negative predictor of Psychological Wellbeing. Ambivalence has been previously negatively associated with physical and psychological wellbeing (operationalized as absence of depression or anxiety) (King & Emmons, 1988; Barr, Kahn, & Schneider, 2008; Brockmeyer et al., 2013). This study suggests that Ambivalence could also hinder positive psychological wellbeing.

Ambivalence about emotional expression could hinder psychological wellbeing in two ways. Firstly, Ambivalence is a stronger negative predictor of Psychological Wellbeing, when compared to the positive predictive ability of Expressive Flexibility. This finding suggests that even when an individual is behaviorally equipped for emotional expressiveness, strong ambivalence about emotional expressiveness could hamper the ability to fully exploit the benefits of better emotion regulation, resulting in lesser psychological wellbeing. Secondly, higher ambivalence could lead to indiscriminate use of a single regulatory strategy in all situations owing to limited context-sensitivity, responsiveness to feedback and repertoire of regulatory strategies. This kind of inflexible regulation has been well evidenced to incur negative physical and psychological wellbeing (Bonanno, 2001; Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004). Further research is required to empirically substantiate the claims made regarding the association between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression and Expressive Flexibility.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The current study suggested strong associations between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing. Significant gender effects in Expressive Flexibility were observed. Men possessed lower levels of ambivalence and better expressive flexibility and psychological wellbeing. Ambivalence over Emotional Expression was evidenced to be a strong negative predictor of Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing. Furthermore, Expressive Flexibility was observed to be a strong positive predictor of Psychological Wellbeing. Higher ambivalence was observed to have a stronger negative effect on Psychological Wellbeing than the positive effect of Expressive Flexibility.

#### ***Limitations of the Study***

The current study was conducted with  $n=73$  ( $n=30$  males,  $n=43$  females) young adults. A larger sample size could enhance the claims made in the study and increase generalizability. Most participants were South Indian, female, single, undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, the relative lack of demographic diversity helps to automatically control third-variable interference. Another major concern regarding the Expressive Flexibility task is that the participants were not filmed during the process. Therefore the raters could not observe relative expressiveness among participants, which could have improved the accuracy of expression ratings. Although the IAPS was standardized for Indian population, it would be ideal to choose an Indian picture stimuli set such as the TRENDS, while studying complex phenomena such as emotion regulation.

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### *Implications of the Study*

This study provides insight into the mechanisms underlying Expressive Flexibility, which is a novel and emerging concept of interest in the field of emotion regulation. This is the first study to explore the relationship between Expressive Flexibility and Positive Psychological health. Furthermore, an understanding of the pattern of interaction between Ambivalence over Emotional Expression, Expressive Flexibility and Psychological Wellbeing could help identify areas for therapeutic intervention.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors carefully declare this paper to bear not a conflict of interests.

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