Emotion profiles in anger- and shame-eliciting situations: Using latent class analysis to examine emotion differentiation

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The ability to differentiate between discrete emotions with precision has been termed emotion differentiation or emotional granularity and is assumed to facilitate affect regulation. “High differentiators” distinguish between emotions such as anger, sadness, or shame when describing their emotional experience whereas “low differentiators” describe their feelings along a broad pleasant-unpleasant continuum. To assess individual differences in emotion differentiation, emotional experience is typically measured repeatedly (e.g., via experience sampling), and a within-persons intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is calculated that captures the degree to which individuals rate emotion terms consistently across situations. A drawback of the ICC is that it does not inform us about the specific profiles of emotions that individuals experience in different situations. Knowledge about emotion profiles might shed more light on qualitative differences between individuals with respect to the specificity of emotional experience and their relation to regulation behavior and well-being. Therefore, our aim was to use latent class analysis as a novel way to examine individual differences in emotion differentiation. To control for the situations that individuals encounter, we chose a scenario-based method and focused on anger- and shame-inducing situations. We hypothesized that at least two classes (types) of individuals could be differentiated based on their profiles of emotional experience (high vs. low differentiators) and that these classes of individuals report different levels of behavioral reactions (e.g., rumination, aggressive behavior) and well-being. Eighty-one German adolescents completed a scenario task, in which they rated their anger, shame, and pride experience and their behavioral reactions to four hypothetical situations (two anger-inducing and two shame-inducing situations). A latent class model with three latent classes fit the data best. One class had high probabilities to experience high levels of both anger and shame across situations, but not pride (“low negative differentiation”), whereas a second class reported less intense and more specific emotion experience (congruent with the situation). The smallest class had high probabilities to experience both anger and shame, but also pride, in anger and shame situations (“low general differentiation”). In a subsequent analysis testing for hypothesized differences between classes in covariates, the “low general differentiation” class reported higher rumination responses and lower dispositional well-being (self- and parent-reported) than the other two classes. Taken together, the results show that latent class analysis can be a useful tool to examine emotion differentiation and that the focus on specific emotion profiles might possibly lead to a refined emotion differentiation concept.