



Interpersonal instrumental emotion regulation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- People regulate the emotions of others to achieve personal instrumental benefits.
- People can make both friends and foes feel bad, if they expect to benefit from it.
- Interpersonal regulation may depend on the perceived utility of others' emotions.

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ABSTRACT

What motivates people to regulate the emotions of others? Prior research has shown that people are motivated to regulate the emotions of others to make others feel better. This investigation, however, was designed to test whether people are also motivated to regulate the emotions of others to promote personal instrumental benefits. We tested whether participants would be motivated to increase unpleasant (Studies 1–3) or pleasant (Study 3) emotions in others, when they expected to benefit from doing so. We found that participants tried to increase an emotion in others when it was expected to lead to desirable outcomes, but decrease an emotion in others when it was expected to lead to undesirable outcomes. These instrumental motives were found even when they led participants to make their partners feel worse and their rivals feel better. Furthermore, the more participants expected others' emotions to result in behaviors that would personally benefit (or harm) participants themselves, the more they were motivated to increase (or decrease) the corresponding emotion in others. These findings demonstrate the operation of instrumental motives in regulating the emotions of others, whether friends or foes.

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Introduction

We sometimes need the help of others to achieve our goals. We rely on our friends to confront those who try to take advantage of us, and we rely on our co-workers to help us meet important deadlines at work. In such cases, the attainment of our goals depends on the performance of others, which may be influenced by their emotional state. Our friends might be more effective in standing up to others when they are angry, and our colleagues might work harder when they are worried. From an instrumental perspective, we should be motivated to optimize the performance of others, if we stand to gain from it, even when that entails influencing their emotional experience (e.g., get them worked up or worried). Such cases in which we try to influence the emotions of others to attain personal benefits are the focus of the current investigation.

Interpersonal emotion regulation

Humans are inherently motivated to connect with others (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this context, emotions often serve as antecedents and consequences of social interactions (e.g., Averill, 1983; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012; Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). In part because one's emotional experiences influence social interactions, people sometimes try to regulate their emotions. The process by which individuals attempt to regulate or control their own emotional experiences is called intrapersonal emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Other times, people may try to regulate and control the emotions of others. The process by which individuals attempt to regulate or control the emotional experiences of other people is called interpersonal emotion regulation (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989; Gross & Thompson, 2007).

People often regulate the emotions of others and have their emotions regulated by others (Butler, 2011; Butler & Randall, 2013). Such attempts to regulate the emotions of others occur both consciously (e.g., Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009) and unconsciously (e.g., Parkinson, 2011), and appear to influence the well-being of the

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regulated person (e.g., Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003), the regulating person (e.g., Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Headley, 2012), and the relationship between them (e.g., Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

Despite a growing interest in interpersonal emotion regulation, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding what people want to achieve when they regulate the emotions of others. Goals in emotion regulation are critical because they set the direction of the regulatory process (Mauss & Tamir, 2014). Understanding what motivates interpersonal emotion regulation, therefore, is important from both theoretical and applied perspectives.

Hedonic interpersonal emotion regulation

Most of the available evidence for interpersonal emotion regulation involves cases in which people try to increase pleasant emotions (e.g., Gable & Reis, 2010) or decrease unpleasant emotions (e.g., Rimé, 2007) in the other. According to Zaki and Williams (2013), decreasing unpleasant emotions or increasing pleasant emotions in others makes people (i.e., the regulators) feel better. One possibility, therefore, is that people regulate the feelings of others, in part, to achieve hedonic benefits.

The manner in which others' pleasure or pain influences our own emotional experiences, however, varies as a function of our relationship with them. People tend to identify with their partners or members of their ingroup and favor them over rivals or members of the outgroup (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). As a result, people typically want their friends and allies to feel good (e.g., Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008), and rejoice in their good fortune (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976; Sloan, 1989). In contrast, people tend to dislike rivals or members of the outgroup (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de-Rivera, 2007; Plant & Devine, 2003). As a result, people typically want their foes and rivals to feel bad (e.g., Bornstein & Ben-Yossef, 1994; Brewer & Kramer, 1985), and rejoice at their misfortune (e.g., Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011; Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). Hence, to the extent that interpersonal emotion regulation is hedonically driven, people may be motivated to decrease unpleasant emotions or increase pleasant emotions among partners, and to decrease pleasant emotions or increase unpleasant emotions among rivals.

Instrumental interpersonal emotion regulation

Regardless of their hedonic impact, emotions can promote goal attainment (e.g., Oatley & Jenkins, 1992; Parrott, 2001). For example, anger can promote aggressive and confrontational behaviors (e.g., Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). Because emotions can influence behavior in a manner that promotes goal attainment, people are sometimes motivated to regulate their own emotions for instrumental reasons. People are even willing to experience unpleasant emotions to attain instrumental benefits. For instance, people who were about to perform a confrontational task chose to increase their level of anger in preparation for the task (Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). Increasing anger indeed resulted in better performance in the confrontational task. The motivation to increase anger, in turn, was linked to the belief that anger is useful for the task at hand (Tamir & Bigman, 2014; Tamir & Ford, 2012b).

If people are motivated to regulate their own emotions for instrumental reasons, they might also be motivated to regulate the emotions of others for instrumental reasons, regardless of the hedonic benefit or cost this may carry for the other person. We propose that people can be motivated to increase unpleasant emotions in others to attain personal instrumental benefits. Such instrumental motives might override hedonic ones, such that people may even be motivated to increase unpleasant emotions in their partners and decrease such emotions in their rivals when doing so is instrumental for them.

The current investigation

We hypothesized that if people expect certain emotions in others to be beneficial for them personally, they would want to increase these emotions in others, even when these emotions are unpleasant. To test our hypotheses, we examined how people regulated the emotions of others when they were likely to benefit or lose from an emotional other. In three studies, participants were told they would be paired with another person who would play an aggressive computer game (or a dancing game in Study 3). Across studies, participants could benefit (or lose) from the confrontational behavior of their presumed counterpart. Therefore, since anger can promote confrontational behavior, the others' anger should be beneficial (or harmful) for participants. We measured what participants wanted the other person to feel while playing the game, as well as how they tried to regulate the emotions of the other by selecting emotion-inducing stimuli for the other.

In all studies, we informed participants of the potential gain or loss resulting from the other persons' behavior. In Studies 1 and 3, we also introduced others in relational terms, such that others in the gain condition were considered 'partners' and others in the loss condition were considered 'rivals'. To test the generalizability of our account, in Study 3, we included additional conditions in which participants could either gain or lose from the others' outgoing behavior, which may be promoted by happiness.

We predicted that participants who expected to gain from a specific emotion in the other would want to increase that emotion in the other and prefer to expose the other to stimuli that induce that emotion. In contrast, we predicted that participants who expected to lose from a specific emotion in the other would want to decrease that emotion in the other and prefer to expose the other to less stimuli that induce that emotion and to more neutral stimuli. We expected such interpersonal preferences to be a function of the expected instrumentality of the emotion, rather than a tendency to act in accordance with concurrent feelings, or a desire to share concurrent feelings with the other.

Study 1

Social interactions critically depend on the nature of the social relationship. People tend to feel closer to partners than to rivals and want what is best for their partners. Previous research demonstrated that merely labeling others as 'partners' or 'rivals' brings people to act more favorably towards the former than the latter (Burnham, McCabe, & Smith, 2000). Much in the same way, we expected people to generally want partners, but not rivals, to feel good. Therefore, in Study 1 we tested whether instrumental motives could drive interpersonal emotion regulation even when the other is considered a partner or a rival. Specifically, we tested whether people would be motivated to increase anger in a partner (but not in a rival) when they could benefit from doing so.

Participants were told that the experiment involves another person who would play a computer game in which successful performance is indicated by the number of enemies killed, and that participants themselves would be eligible for a monetary prize depending on the other's performance. Participants in the partnership condition were told that they would be paired with a partner and that if their partner performs well, their chances of winning a monetary prize would increase. Participants in the rivalry condition were told that they would be paired with a rival and that if their rival performs well, their chances of winning a monetary prize will decrease. If anger is expected to promote aggression, then anger in the other could be beneficial for participants in the partnership condition, but detrimental for participants in the rivalry condition. Therefore, to the extent that people want to benefit from the emotions of others, they might be willing to make partners feel worse (by increasing their level of anger) and rivals feel better.

We tested the extent to which participants wanted to increase anger in the other, by testing how much they wanted to expose the other to either anger-inducing or neutral stimuli before playing the game. To

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