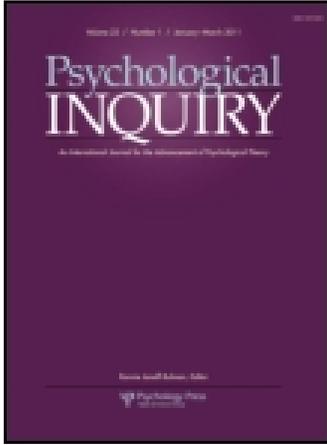


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Emotion Regulation Growth Points: Three More to Consider

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Breathtaking. That's one of the terms Gross (this issue) uses to describe the breadth and depth of research performed on emotion regulation to date. I couldn't agree more. As the target article demonstrates, the last two decades represent a renaissance period of sorts for researchers interested in understanding emotion regulation. Each month, journals from nearly every discipline in psychology report new discoveries addressing this fundamental human capacity. Many of these articles build directly from Gross's seminal work in this area (Gross, 1998a, 1998b). Thus, I was delighted to learn about how these developments have influenced the views of the individual who helped launch this fascinating area of research.

Overall, I found this article stimulating. The extensions proposed to the process model are innovative and exciting. Incorporating cybernetic principles into a framework for conceptualizing how emotion regulation operates on a moment-to-moment basis promises to generate new discoveries that illuminate how this process operates in daily life and across multiple levels of analysis. The section on growth points for the field also provides much food for thought. I suspect they will help shape the agenda for emotion regulation research in the years to come.

Of course, any stimulating piece of scholarship is bound to raise questions. And this article is no exception. In the following sections I summarize three questions that occurred to me while reading this piece and discuss why addressing them has the potential to enrich our understanding of how emotion regulation works in ways that may benefit basic science and society.

Do "Pure Forms" of Emotion Regulation Exist?

The target article emphasizes the importance of studying how different types of emotion regulation strategies interact and are flexibly utilized in daily life—an issue appropriately labeled “blends, sequences, and flexibility.” This is an excellent suggestion. Although many researchers have suggested that people flexibly use different emotion regulation strategies in daily life (e.g., Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Cheng, 2003; Mischel, 2014), research has only recently begun to rigorously explore this issue. Studying it, however, requires a firm understanding of the basic strategies that people use to regulate their emo-

tions—that is, the components that create blends and sequences. The target article acknowledges this point, noting, “[continuing to examine] relatively *pure forms of emotion regulation* [e.g., situation modification, cognitive change, attentional deployment, response modulation] is important for both theoretical and practical reasons” (p. 16).

But do relatively pure forms of emotion regulation exist? I'm not sure that they do. Further, I worry that conceptualizing any family of emotion regulation strategies (e.g., situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, response modulation) as representing a “pure form” may cloud our ability to draw inferences about how blends, sequences, and flexibility operate.

Let me elaborate on this concern by way of analogy. In medicine, antibiotics are regularly used to treat bacterial infections. However, there are many types of antibiotic drugs (e.g., penicillins, rifamycins, tetracyclines). Whether a physician prescribes one or another depends largely on the nature of the bacterial infection she is trying to treat. Prescribing the wrong drug does the patient no good. In fact, it may do the patient harm by allowing the infection to worsen. Prescribing the right drug, on the other hand, saves lives.

Now consider as an example cognitive change, one of the relatively pure forms emotion regulation described in the target article. Countless studies demonstrate that changing the way one thinks about an emotionally arousing stimulus can change the way one feels. But people can change the way they think to change the way they feel in potentially infinite ways. They can optimistically reinterpret a situation, adopt an incremental mind-set, analyze their feelings to find meaning, pretend what they're experiencing is not real, assume a detached perspective—the possibilities are endless.

Are these different reappraisals interchangeable? Do they serve the same function or, as in the case of different antibiotic medications, is it possible that certain reappraisals are more helpful in certain situations compared to others? I suspect the latter.

The idea that different types of reappraisal strategies exist and can lead to different outcomes is not radical (e.g., Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Moser, Hartwig, Moran, Jendrusina, & Kross, 2014; Ochsner et al., 2004; e.g., Shiota & Levenson, 2009; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). I suspect that the same is true for the

other families of emotion regulation strategies described in the process model. My point in raising this issue is to suggest that as we move forward to study blends, sequences, and flexibility, we be mindful of these distinctions. Recognizing that different tactics may lead to different outcomes has the potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of how emotion regulation works. Although it is not clear whether we will ever be able to “prescribe” an emotion regulation strategy to treat a particular problem of living in the same way that a physician can prescribe an antibiotic to treat a specific bacterial infection, carefully illuminating the basic mechanisms that underlie different tactics is an important step in this direction.

Is Timing Still Everything?

Time factors prominently into both the original and extended process models of emotion regulation but in different ways. In the original model, a distinction was forged between antecedent and response-focused strategies that generated predictions about the relative effectiveness of one type of strategy versus the other (Gross, 1998a). Specifically, situation modification, attention deployment, and cognitive change were considered antecedent strategies that are typically activated before emotional responses are generated. In contrast, response modulation (i.e., expressive suppression) was conceptualized as a “response-focused” strategy that people used primarily after an emotion is triggered. Because antecedent strategies were thought to operate *before* emotional responses build, they were expected to be more adaptive than response-focused strategies. As the target article reviews, many studies support this claim.

Time also features prominently into the extended model. Here the focus is on how evaluative processes relevant to emotion regulation unfold temporally and govern the identification, selection, and implementation of strategies. Missing from this model, however, is a discussion of how antecedent and response-focused processes operate in this dynamic. Are they still relevant, or do the iterative dynamics that are the focal point of the extended process model diminish the relevance of this distinction?

Addressing this issue is important because several recent articles have expanded the role that the antecedent and response-focused processes play in emotion regulation (Sheppes & Gross, 2011). Knowing how these processes operate in the extended process model would thus be useful. At first blush, the iterative valuation dynamics that lie at the heart of the extended process model seem compatible with recent theorizing on antecedent and response-focused processes. That is, it stands to reason that a strategy could be selected and implemented in the moment

that a person believes emotion regulation is important but before the emotion is triggered, reflecting an antecedent process. The same strategy could also be selected and implemented after an emotional response is generated. Whether or not this is true, however, would benefit from both theoretical and empirical explication.

The Emerging Conceptual Challenge: Continue Parsing or Integrate?

The target article acknowledges from the outset that research on emotion regulation, like many areas of research in psychology (Mischel, 2008), suffers from a labeling problem. Researchers use a variety of terms to describe the processes involved in controlling one’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Willpower, self-discipline, inhibitory control, self-regulation, affect regulation, self-control, behavior regulation, mood regulation, mood control, desire regulation, effortful control, coping, thought control, mind control, emotion control, emotion regulation—the list goes on.

Thus far, the dominant strategy for dealing with this panoply of terms has been to parse—to draw distinctions between closely related areas of work so that one can be clear about what one is and is not studying. For example, the target article use term “affect regulation” as an umbrella category that captures three closely related but distinct areas of work on “coping,” “mood regulation,” and “emotion regulation.” To date, this taxonomy has been remarkably useful for motivating research around specific questions—i.e., in the case of “emotion regulation,” how can people control subjective feeling states.

But as the target article illustrates so well, the emotion regulation literature is now bursting at the seams. So much so that I wonder whether it is time to begin integrating across closely related areas of inquiry to identify common threads. Integrating makes sense (to me) for three reasons. First, researchers who identify with different camps often focus on remarkably similar psychological processes. For example, cognitive change and strategic attention deployment processes (among others) are commonly focused on in nearly all of the closely related areas of research just noted. Second, researchers working in related areas often use similar dependent measures to test their predictions. Finally, the theoretical frameworks used to describe the processes involved in regulating closely related elements of human experience (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behavior, impulses, mood, stress, etc.) are highly overlapping. The target article illustrates this observation well. For decades cybernetic principles have been profitably used to make sense of the self-regulation literature (Carver &

Scheier, 1981). Here we see another cybernetic model proposed to make sense of how people control subjective feelings states.

Do substantive differences characterize how people regulate thoughts, feelings, behaviors, moods, and stress? Perhaps. However, I suspect that there are many similarities too. And given how blurry the line between some of these experiences can be in daily life, taking the next steps to build integrative models that illuminate whether a common set of basic processes underlie them seems like an important challenge.

Concluding Comment

Few people have contributed as much to our understanding of how people can control their emotions over the past two decades than James Gross. His seminal publications on this topic (Gross, 1998a, 1998b) triggered an explosion of research that the target article eloquently synthesizes to take stock of what we know and still need to know about emotion regulation. My intention in raising the three questions discussed in this commentary is to provide researchers with additional points to consider as they attempt to illuminate how this critically important human faculty operates.

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Note

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