

Examining Emotional Tool Use in Daily Life

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Emotions such as anger, gratitude, envy, and pride can be thought of as tools: They tend to serve context-specific functions in daily life. Prior work has shown that people *can* use emotions as tools in laboratory contexts, yet it is unclear whether people *do* use emotions as tools in daily life by intentionally trying to feel or express emotions that could yield context-specific beneficial outcomes. We examined this issue in 6 studies (total $N = 1,409$) in which participants (a) identified scenarios where specific emotions typically function as tools, (b) recalled episodes of emotional tool use, and (c) reported on emotional tool use in daily life via experience-sampling under experimental instructions. We found that people regularly used emotions as tools in daily life, but that people used positive emotions as tools much more frequently than negative emotions. Yet, when people used positive emotions as tools, this led to less beneficial outcomes than when participants felt positive emotions reactively—in part because using positive emotions as tools felt inauthentic—whereas using negative emotions as tools led to more beneficial outcomes than feeling negative emotions reactively. These findings point to a fascinating paradox: Although people are more willing to use positive (vs. negative) emotions as tools, these choices may not lead people to garner maximal possible benefits of positive emotions, while preventing people from capitalizing on the benefits of using negative emotions as tools. We discuss implications of this work for incorporating emotional tool use into theories of emotion regulation.

Keywords: authenticity, emotion, emotion function, emotion regulation

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Emotions such as anger, gratitude, envy, and pride can be thought of as tools—responses that help people solve context-specific problems in social life (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Lench, 2018; Shariff & Tracy, 2011; Shiota et al., 2014; Stellar et al., 2017). Although debate exists as to whether emotions have become tools as a result of innate, evolved functionality or because people have learned to associate them with beneficial outcomes (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Moors, 2017), there is robust evidence that emotions tend to serve beneficial purposes in daily life. For example, displaying anger during a negotiation typically elicits favorable concessions (Andrade & Ho, 2009; van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004), expressing gratitude toward a romantic partner typically increases relationship satisfaction (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016), feeling envy typically motivates people to attain a desired object or attribute of another person (Lange & Crusius, 2015; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009), and feeling proud typically motivates hard work

and calculated persistence toward a goal (Weidman, Tracy, & Elliot, 2016; Williams & DeSteno, 2008).

Whether innately functional or socially learned, the fact that emotions typically serve as tools has clear implications: If emotions are tools, then they are most usefully deployed (i.e., experienced or expressed) in contexts in which their functional purposes match situational demands. Using the examples above, anger is likely to be most useful when negotiating, gratitude is likely to be most useful when interacting with a romantic partner, envy is likely to be most useful when one wishes to obtain something another person has, and pride is likely to be most useful when one wants to accomplish a goal.

Prior work has shown that people *can* effectively use emotions as tools in laboratory contexts (see Tamir, 2009b, 2016, for reviews). Here we examine a distinct question, namely whether people *do* use emotions as tools in daily life (Mook, 1983). We define emotional tool use as intentional attempts to try and feel or express a certain emotion because it is expected to be useful—in terms of helping to accomplish a specific goal—in a given context. We further seek to answer two questions regarding potential asymmetries across positive and negative valence in the prevalence and efficacy of emotional tool use: (a) Do people use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions in daily life? and (b) Does using positive versus negative emotions as tools—compared with feeling these emotions in a more reactive manner—have distinct implications for the likelihood that those emotions bring about beneficial outcomes? We elaborate on each of these possibilities below.

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Do People Use Positive Emotions as Tools More Frequently Than Negative Emotions?

People have a strong and often chronic desire to feel positive emotions (e.g., Larsen, 2000). When asked to reflect on the past day's events or their desired emotions throughout the day, people report wishing to feel more pleasant emotion and less unpleasant emotion (Kämpfe & Mitte, 2009; Riediger, Schmiedek, Wagner, & Lindenberger, 2009). Furthermore, most emotion regulation episodes involve trying to get rid of a negative emotion (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006), a trend which is reflected in emotion regulation science: A comprehensive meta-analysis of experimental tests of the efficacy of emotion regulation strategies found that more than 90% examined people's attempts to reduce the intensity of negative emotions (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), and a recent meta-analytic examination of people's dispositional tendencies to engage in emotion regulation strategies focused exclusively on strategies meant to help rid people of negative emotional experiences (Naragon-Gainey, McMahon, & Chacko, 2017).

A likely result of the pervasive preference for positive emotions is that people will use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions in daily life: To use an emotion as a tool, one likely must believe that this emotion is worthwhile to feel. Yet this possibility to date has received little empirical examination. Tamir and colleagues have shown that people *can* use emotions as tools in laboratory contexts. For example, they have demonstrated that people can use emotions as tools in the case of anger (Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008), fear (i.e., Tamir & Ford, 2009), sadness (i.e., Hackenbracht & Tamir, 2010), and happiness (i.e., Tamir, 2009a), and that the decision to use emotions as tools can be driven by conscious considerations of the extent to which emotions might be useful (Tamir & Ford, 2012). However, the only study of which we are aware to have examined whether people *do* use specific emotions as tools in specific daily life contexts examined people's preferences for feeling only two emotions (anger and happiness) across only two broadly defined contexts (competition and collaboration; Kim, Ford, Mauss, & Tamir, 2015).

Goal 1 of the present research was therefore to examine the frequency with which people use a broad spectrum of emotions as tools across a wide range of situations, and to examine this process as it unfolds in daily life. In line with the aforementioned finding that people prefer positive emotions (vs. negative emotions), we predicted that people would use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions.

Does Using Positive Versus Negative Emotions as Tools Have Distinct Implications?

At face value, the possibility that people may use positive emotions as tools more often than negative emotions is cause for celebration: Feeling frequent positive emotions (and infrequent negative emotions) is a central component of well-being (Bussner & Sadava, 2011; Diener, 1984), and positive emotions have considerable downstream benefits in many life domains (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Yet, positive emotions might not function in quite the same way when they are used as tools. This is because using a positive emotion as a tool may produce feelings of inauthenticity, in that one may enact or force an emotion experience that is not in

line with their genuine inner experience (e.g., surface acting; Hochschild, 1983; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Extensive evidence suggests that feeling inauthentic leads to a host of anxiety, stress, and undesirable feelings and behaviors (e.g., Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016; Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013) and that chronic inauthenticity in the context of emotional experiences can degrade social relationships (English & John, 2013). Inauthenticity could therefore turn a positive emotional experience sour by signaling to the individual that the feeling is not really so good after all and in turn potentially invalidating any positive outcomes that stem from the emotional episode. These considerations point to an intriguing possibility: Using positive emotions as tools (compared with feeling positive emotions reactively) may lead to less beneficial outcomes given that doing so likely engenders feelings of inauthenticity.

What about negative emotions? On one hand, like positive emotions, using negative emotions as tools (compared to feeling them reactively) will likely also feel inauthentic. This could put a psychological damper on the functional outcomes that often arise from context-specific negative emotional experiences. On the other hand, inauthenticity might not have the same pernicious effect for negative emotions as it does for positive emotions. This is because people have an intuitive lay understanding that negative emotions are typically undesirable and maladaptive (Gross et al., 2006; Kämpfe & Mitte, 2009; Riediger et al., 2009). As a result, if one feels inauthentic while experiencing a negative emotion, this inauthenticity might signal that the negative emotional episode is not really so bad after all, particularly if the person deliberately chose to feel the negative emotion for instrumental purposes. The person in turn might discount the displeasure that typically comes with a negative emotion. If inauthenticity has this ironically helpful effect when people use negative emotions as tools, it may augment the functional benefits that people gain from deploying negative emotions as tools in appropriate contexts.

In line with these considerations, Goal 2 of the present research was to test two possibilities. First, we tested whether using positive emotions as tools—compared with feeling them more reactively—in fact leads to less beneficial outcomes. We further examined whether feelings of inauthenticity statistically mediate this link. Second, we tested the possibility that using negative emotions as tools enhances the likelihood that these emotions tend to produce beneficial outcomes compared with reactively feeling negative emotions.

The Present Research

We have raised the following possibilities: (a) people use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions; (b) compared with feeling positive emotions reactively, using positive emotions as tools leads to less beneficial outcomes, in part because of feelings of inauthenticity; and (c) compared with feeling negative emotions reactively, using negative emotions as tools enhances the likelihood that these emotions produce beneficial outcomes. These three propositions together raise the possibility of a fascinating paradox: People may strive to use positive emotions as tools even though doing so may be less beneficial than allowing these emotions to play out authentically, whereas people may underuse negative emotions as tools even though using these emotions as tools can help maximize their beneficial outcomes.

We conducted six studies to explore this possibility. Study 1 provides an initial descriptive examination of emotional tool use in daily life, including why and how people use emotions as tools. Studies 2 and 3 explore whether people use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions: Study 2 examines a likely essential prerequisite to using emotions as tools (people's beliefs about the contexts in which it would be appropriate to use positive and negative emotions as tools), and Study 3 uses experience sampling to assess the frequency with which people in fact use positive and negative emotions as tools in daily life. Studies 4a and 4b use a recall-based paradigm to provide an initial test of whether using positive versus negative emotions as tools has different implications for the beneficial outcomes people experience from those emotions, and whether authenticity plays a role in shaping these differential outcomes. Finally, Study 5 uses an experimental manipulation of emotional tool use, combined with an intensive experience sampling protocol, to examine the differential implications of using positive versus negative emotions as tools in real-time across daily life.

To prioritize replicability, we employed large sample sizes across studies, and we replicated several findings across multiple studies. To prioritize generalizability, we recruited samples of both undergraduate students and adults via Amazon MTurk. To prioritize transparency, in each study, we report how we determined our sample size, as well as all data exclusions, all manipulations and conditions, and all measures. All materials, participant instructions, data, and syntax are available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/tnvmj/>). Ancillary measures from each study are reported in the [online supplemental materials](#). Each study reported below was approved under one of the following IRB applications: (a) University of Michigan, HUM00135356 ("Using Emotions as Tools - Experience-Sampling") and (b) University of Michigan, HUM00136075 ("Using Emotions as Tools—Vignette").

Study 1

Study 1 provides an initial descriptive examination of emotional tool use in daily life, including why and how people use emotions as tools. We undertook this descriptive examination in light of the fact that little work has examined emotional tool use in daily life. Participants recalled episodes during which they used emotions as tools, and we (a) content-coded these narratives to ascertain the motives that drove people to use emotions as tools (e.g., accomplishing a task; influencing a relationship; Kalokerinos, Tamir, & Kuppens, 2017; Tamir, 2016) and (b) assessed the strategies people deployed when using emotions as tools (e.g., reappraisal, situation selection; Brans, Koval, Verduyn, Lim, & Kuppens, 2013; Kalokerinos, Réisibois, Verduyn, & Kuppens, 2017).

Method

Participants. Two hundred thirty-four individuals completed the study, including 117 MTurk workers and 117 University of Michigan students. We excluded 28 participants (12% of the original sample; $n = 16$ MTurk workers; $n = 12$ students) for not following the instructions of our writing prompt (i.e., copying and pasting a stock paragraph about emotion; writing nonsense text), leaving a total of 206 participants ($n = 101$ MTurk workers, 62%

women, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.97$, $SD = 10.45$; $n = 105$ students, 29% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 18.95$, $SD = 1.25$). We arrived at our target sample size with the goal of having a ratio of approximately 20 participants for every one item in our planned exploratory factor analysis (as described below, we planned to include 11 items; Costello & Osborne, 2005; Henson & Roberts, 2006).

Procedure. Participants were told that we were interested in times when a person intentionally tries to feel a certain emotion, because he or she thinks this emotion might be useful to feel in a given situation. Participants were told that this is a completely natural way to feel emotion, and they were given several examples of this phenomenon that were consistent with prior work on emotion function (e.g., "we might try to make ourselves feel proud because it promotes hard work and persistence"; Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Participants were told that they would be writing about a prior episode during which they tried to feel an emotion because they anticipated that it would be useful.

Participants were then randomly assigned to recall one of four positive or negative emotions (valence was manipulated between-subjects). Positive emotion options were authentic pride, compassion, gratitude, and love, and negative emotion options were anger, anxiety, envy, and guilt. Emotion options were each represented with two adjectives, taken from recent work uncovering the words most closely associated with each emotion (Harmon-Jones, Bastian, & Harmon-Jones, 2016; Lange, Weidman, & Crusius, 2018; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Weidman & Tracy, 2020). For example, the response option corresponding to authentic pride was *accomplished and successful* (see the [online supplemental materials](#) for full descriptions). These sets of adjectives were also used to represent the eight emotions in question in Studies 2–5.

Motives. Participants were asked to answer two open-ended questions about their experience: (a) "Why did you intentionally try to make yourself feel [emotion]?" and (b) "How did you go about intentionally trying to make yourself feel [emotion]?" For each question, the selected emotion response option was piped into the bracketed section.

Open-ended responses were coded by the first author and two research assistants as reflecting one of four utilitarian motives included in Tamir's (2016) taxonomy: (a) performance (i.e., to accomplish a task); (b) social (i.e., to enhance a relationship); (c) epistemic (i.e., to gain information about the self or the world); and (d) eudaimonic (i.e., to grow as a person; see also Kalokerinos, Tamir, & Kuppens, 2017). If a given set of narratives did not fall in one of these four categories, coders could instead classify it as hedonic motivation (i.e., to feel good; see the [online supplemental materials](#) for full coding instructions). If at least two of the three coders assigned a set of narratives to a given motive category, we retained that categorization. If all three coders disagreed—which occurred for only eight narratives (4%)—they met to resolve discrepancies and reach a consensus categorization. Coders showed strong agreement ($M_{\text{agreement}} = .79$; $M_{\text{kappa}} = .71$).

Strategies. Participants considered 11 strategies they may have engaged in to make themselves feel the selected emotion. We wrote these 11 items with the goal of representing a broad and inclusive set of strategies typically studied in the emotion regulation domain, including situation selection ("I engaged in a specific activity"), situation modification ("I changed something about the activity I was already doing"), distraction ("I thought about some-

tool use into future empirical work with more regularity could help provide a richer portrait of emotion regulation in daily life.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present work points to several limitations as well as future directions that would help build a greater understanding of emotional tool use. First, our work focused entirely on comparing emotional tool use to reactive emotional experience in terms of producing beneficial outcomes. Another critical comparison is between using emotions as tools and not feeling any emotion at all. For example, in the opening epigraph of the General Discussion, a woman experienced a negative outcome because she inauthentically felt compassion for her stepson, who has ADHD. Our findings suggest that, had the woman reactively (and authentically) felt compassion, the situation would have turned out better. Of course, it would be impossible for the woman to guarantee that such a positive feeling toward her stepson would reactively arise in this scenario. This raises the question of what would have happened if the woman had felt no compassion at all. Our work does not speak to this question. However, future work could shed light on this question by experimentally inducing people to use emotions as tools and, during a separate period of time, to withhold their impulses to use emotions as tools (much like the design we used in Study 5). One could then compare the typical benefits that arise from emotional tool use and withheld emotional tool use. Another interesting comparison that merits future study is that between emotional tool use and hedonic emotion regulation. Our experimental manipulations in Studies 4 and 5 compared emotional tool use (i.e., a form of emotion regulation) with reactive emotions (i.e., not regulating one's emotions). The link between emotional tool use and beneficial outcomes could have been produced in part by the simple act of *any* emotion regulation compared with allowing one's emotions to unfold naturally. This possibility seems particularly relevant for negative emotional scenarios, where any act of emotion regulation might be expected to improve the situation. Future work should therefore directly test whether emotional tool use has distinct implications compared with hedonic emotion regulation.

Second, future work could examine the link between people's beliefs about when positive and negative emotions function as tools and the beneficial outcomes people derive from using these emotions as tools. This issue is important in light of a recent finding by Tamir and Bigman (2018) showing that anger enhanced performance on a laboratory competitive task—a context in which we would expect anger to be useful—primarily among participants who expected anger to be useful in this context. In contrast, among participants who did not expect anger to be useful, anger did not enhance performance. These findings imply that when people use emotions as tools, their belief regarding the efficacy of those emotions likely plays a role in shaping the subsequent beneficial outcomes (see also Ford, Lwi, Gentzler, Hankin, & Mauss, 2018).

Third, future work could dive more deeply into the specific beneficial outcomes that arise from using emotions as tools. Emotions can promote a diverse array of beneficial outcomes, both intrapsychic (e.g., pride typically motivates people to work hard and efficiently; Weidman et al., 2016; Williams & DeSteno, 2008) and interpersonal (e.g., anger tends to lead to confrontation and negotiation; Andrade & Ho, 2009; van Kleef et al., 2004). In

Studies 4 and 5, given that we wished to compare beneficial outcomes of many positive and negative emotions on the same metric, we used a broad measure of outcomes that could encompass the distinct benefits that each of these emotions provide. Future work could perform more targeted investigations of beneficial outcomes specific to one emotion (e.g., performance on an effortful task in the case of authentic pride; a negotiation partner's monetary concession in the case of anger).

Fourth, future work could examine more nuanced forms of emotional experience than we have examined in the present work. For example, in Studies 3–5 we treated emotional tool use and reactive emotional experience as two dichotomous types of emotional episodes. We made this theoretical assumption to facilitate comparisons between these two forms of emotion experience on our key dependent measures (e.g., beneficial outcomes, authenticity) as well as to arrive at a conservative estimate of the frequency of pure episodes of emotional tool use in daily life. However, one could imagine emotional episodes that blend these two descriptions, for example if a person begins to experience an emotional reaction before intentionally channeling it to a purportedly useful outcome. We would be intrigued to see future work examine this type of emotional episode, perhaps using designs in which people describe emotional episodes online as they unfold (e.g., Kalokerinos, Résibois, et al., 2017). Similarly, future work could examine how emotional tool use plays out when people intentionally try to feel a blend of multiple emotions, rather than just one emotion (as was the focus in our studies).

Fifth, future work might examine individual differences in frequency and context-specificity of emotional tool use. Although our focus was on broad patterns in emotional tool use (e.g., people use positive emotions as tools more frequently than negative emotions), individual differences in emotional tool use may have implications for well-being and social functioning. For example, Tamir and Ford (2012) found that people who typically wished to feel anger in confrontational scenarios and happiness in collaborative scenarios—each of which represents a match between emotion function and situational demands—reported higher levels of well-being. An index such as that used by Tamir and Ford (2012), which captures people's tendency to use emotions as tools in a context-sensitive manner, could be viewed as an index of broad emotional intelligence, which includes people's ability to match emotions to appropriate situations (Elfenbein & MacCann, 2017; Mayer et al., 2003).

Coda

A large body of evidence suggests that emotions can be thought of as tools which typically serve useful purposes. The present work provides the first evidence that people do in fact use a wide array of emotions as tools with some regularity in daily life. However, we also found that people appear to have room for improvement in the strategies they employ when using emotions as tools. People display a great eagerness to use positive emotions as tools, even though doing so engenders feelings of inauthenticity compared with reactive positive emotion experience and in turn can produce less beneficial outcomes. At the same time, people fail to frequently use negative emotions as tools even though doing so brings considerable benefits compared with feeling reactive negative emotions. We hope that the present work sparks future

inquiry into the common and consequential phenomenon of emotional tool use.

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