Regulating Emotion in the Short and Long Term

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By offering distinct characterizations of the causes and consequences of emotion regulation, the target articles in this issue encourage a useful dialog that can advance relevant research. In these comments, we highlight what we consider the differing claims of the three articles, and we explore the relevance of our own work to these claims.

Although all three target articles assume that people regulate their emotions, they diverge in their accounts of the consequences of emotion regulation and of the motives for engaging in it. Regarding consequences, Tice and Bratslavsky (this issue) highlight how "giving in to feel good" can interfere with other important life tasks, whereas Larsen (this issue) and the Erbers (this issue) note the adaptive significance of emotion regulation. Regarding motives, Tice and Bratslavsky and Larsen assume that people are motivated to feel good, whereas the Erbers challenge this assumption, arguing instead that people are motivated to adapt their moods to relevant social constraints.

Thinking about emotion regulation as a long-term as well as a short-term process can help bring together these accounts. To examine first the motives of emotion regulation, perhaps people indeed are motivated to feel good, but in the distant as well as immediate future. Consider, for example, Mischel and colleagues' (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) classic delay-of-gratification paradigm, in which children must choose between one cookie now or two cookies later. Choosing to wait some period of time for two cookies, rather than to consume immediately a single cookie, does not necessarily imply that one is not motivated to enjoy the single cookie. Rather, a child may be so captivated by the cookie that he or she will forestall enjoying it temporarily to enjoy it twofold later. Consider next what we view as a loosely analogous situation in the Erbers' social constraints paradigm, in which people expecting to interact with nonfamiliar others must choose between stimulus materials (e.g., stories to read) they expect will either attenuate or prolong their happy moods. In this case, the Erbers infer that people choosing to attenuate their happy moods are not motivated to be happy. Attenuating a possibly inappropriate happy mood before meeting someone, however, could make for a happier interaction. Indeed, acceptance by others, the potential payoff for responding appropriately to social constraints, is a potent reinforcer, even regarded by some as the primary quality measured by the s*ociometer* of self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

As the Erbers acknowledge, then, it is difficult to reject outright the general notion that people sometimes attenuate their current positive moods to experience future happiness, as exemplified by an adult forgoing an amusing story to attain social acceptance or by a child delaying consuming a cookie to consume two cookies. However, research needs to address the Erbers' call for more precise accounts of why people would sometimes perform a behavior in order to feel good but other times avoid performing the same behavior for the same reason. Attempts at addressing this point also may help shed further light on the question of the consequences of emotion regulation, another point on which we suggested that the three target articles diverge.

In our own recent work, we have examined the immediate as well as temporally distal emotional states people can strive for when seeking self-relevant information (Freitas, Salovey, & Liberman, 2000). We hypothesized that an immediate self-evaluative goal is to acquire self-knowledge that will boost rather than damage one's self-esteem, but that a more abstract self-evaluative goal is to acquire self-knowledge that will help one attain life satisfaction. To test these predictions, we gauged college students' interest in receiving career aptitude feedback, available either immediately or 1 year later and indicating careers in which they likely would experience either career satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Both types of feedback could help lead one down the road to life satisfaction. However, feedback indicating careers for which one is not well-suited could damage one's immediate self-esteem, and we predicted that this aspect of the feedback would cause it to be less desirable in the immediate than distant future (cf. Liberman & Trope, 1998). In contrast, feedback indicating careers for which one is well-suited could boost one's immediate self-esteem, and we predicted that this aspect of the feedback would cause it to be more desirable in the immediate than distant future. Supporting these hypotheses, success-related feedback was favored in the immediate future, whereas failure-related feedback was favored in the distant future. A follow-up study showed this effect to be mediated by people's desire to be comfortable during the assessment but not by their expectancies of successful versus unsuccessful assessment results.

These data suggest that the desire to feel good can be expressed as striving for career satisfaction when construing of a feedback opportunity in abstract terms but as striving for comfortable assessment conditions

when construing of a feedback opportunity in immediate, concrete terms. In this case, then, exploring the consequences of emotion regulation requires differentiating not only immediate and long-term consequences but also attempts at regulating immediate and temporally distal emotions. Focusing on regulating immediately anticipated emotions (e.g., comfort during assessment) may have decreased participants' willingness to receive potentially useful feedback, thereby interfering with the important life task of choosing a career. However, focusing on regulating future emotions (e.g., career satisfaction) may have increased participants' willingness to receive potentially useful feedback, thereby facilitating choosing a career.

Tice and Bratslavsky (this issue) point out that regulating emotions often can undermine other types of self-control. Our data suggest that attempting to regulate future emotions (e.g., achievement satisfaction) may actually fortify other types of self-control (e.g., achievement striving), but attempting to regulate current emotions (e.g., comfort) indeed can undermine other types of self-control. However, there are times when regulating even immediate emotional states benefits goal striving. Because positive moods may contribute to good health (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000), for example, one might expect that regulating current emotions could help people attain the presumably universal goal of good health. In one study testing this idea, college students reporting that they generally attempt to repair negative moods were less likely to complain of illness (Goldman, Kraemer, & Salovey, 1996). These benefits of mood regulation were especially pronounced among participants experiencing heightened distress in response to impending examinations, thus suggesting that regulating immediate emotions can serve as an important buffer against life stressors. To complement and build upon the research Tice and Bratslavsky review, future investigators need to delineate further the contexts in which regulating immediate emotions helps or hinders other goal-striving efforts.

Construing emotion regulation as both a long-term and a short-term process, then, our views of the causes and consequences of emotion regulation seem most closely aligned with those presented in Larsen's target article. People generally are motivated to feel good, and trying to feel good is often adaptive. In closing, however, we need to point out what we see as a potential limitation of Larsen's characterization of the structure of the emotions. Larsen describes positive and negative emotions as independent systems, but our work has shown that they are better characterized as opposite ends of the same, bipolar dimension (Green, Goldman, & Salovey, 1993; Green & Salovey, 1999; Green, Salovey, & Truax, 1999). Even investigators identified by Larsen as supporting the independence idea have recently softened their positions in this regard and acknowledged that the association between the experience of positive and negative affect is not zero, especially after correcting for measurement error (Watson & Tellegen, 1999; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). Despite the pages devoted to this debate in major journals, it is actually a relatively minor issue in the present context. We endorse Larsen's focus on the adaptive significance of emotional regulation—indeed such regulation is a major component of what we elsewhere have termed *emotional intelligence* (e.g., Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000).

Note

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