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NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN EMOTION REGULATION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON THE POSITIVE SPECTRUM OF HUMAN FUNCTIONING

ABSTRACT. There is converging evidence from several psychological fields on the ways in which individuals engage in specific strategies to modify, alter, or accept their emotional experiences to obtain more desirable outcomes. The current Special Issue is dedicated to a series of examinations on how these self-regulatory strategies can promote resilience, create and sustain positive moods and intrinsic motivation, and aid in the repair of different negative emotions. The content of these articles are briefly reviewed in the context of additional ideas for scientific advancements in understanding and developing positive health.

KEY WORDS: emotion regulation, affect, positive emotions

Human beings are not passive agents that simply experience emotions. Besides experiencing emotions, individuals monitor, regulate, and in some cases, struggle with them. Individuals' develop relationships with their own subjective, behavioral, and physiological affective responses which can serve as vulnerability factors for psychological distress and disorder (e.g., anxiety sensitivity, suppression) or resilience factors that increase the likelihood of pleasurable, engaging, and meaningful living (e.g., savoring, acceptance). With the ubiquity of emotional experiences, short and long term goals, and situational challenges, people are inclined to manage their emotions in ways to obtain more desirable outcomes or at least attempt to control or cope with adverse outcomes. Of course, individuals differ in their ability to attend to, accurately identify, and process emotions; willingness to experience and express emotions; flexibility to adopt regulatory strategies that are appropriate to the environmental context; and capacity to recognize the effectiveness of

these strategies and act to make changes as necessary. There is substantial overlap between emotion regulation that is successful in obtaining whatever goal individuals have and emotional intelligence (Mayer and Salovey, 1995).

The given complexity of emotions and regulatory attempts leaves a number of points in the process for individuals to experience dysfunction and pathology. Although more neglected than emotion disturbances, there is growing evidence that self-regulation is also an important factor in positive psychological processes and outcomes (e.g., Bryant, 1989; Langston, 1994; Wilson et al., 2005). Of particular interest to the current Special Issue, the emotion regulatory processes that are relevant to positive outcomes appear to be relatively independent from those processes relevant to negative outcomes and psychopathology. This is important because there has been a historically unequal distribution of research on negative emotions and adverse regulatory strategies such as suppression with much less scientific attention to positive emotions and relevant regulatory strategies such as acceptance and exploratory behavior. This trend is changing as the unique theoretical and empirical implications of positive psychological inputs and outputs have begun to emerge (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, 1998). Upon reading the current articles in this issue, it is evident that an impressive amount of progress is being made in a relatively short period of time on the value of emotion regulation in understanding positive health.

Tugade and Fredrickson (this issue) provide a review of the evidence relating to the psychological benefits of creating or sustaining positive emotional experiences. Their review spans a number of topics including the role of savoring as a method to enjoy positive events before they occur (anticipatory phase), being fully present in ongoing experiences (engagement phase), and evoke remembered positive thoughts, images, and sensations to infuse the present with more pleasure (reminiscing). The process of savoring captures elements of acceptance and mindfulness, which have shown promise as effective interventions to reduce human suffering and improve well-being (Hayes et al., 2004). Other strategies argued to be important include the

purposeful behavioral expression of positive emotions and searching for benefits and meaning in life events (even trauma). The second part of their review explores the intriguing connection between regulating positive emotions and psychological resilience. One of the difficulties in understanding the scope of emotion regulation is that emotions can be regulated by deliberate, effortful strategies or automatic, spontaneous processes (Forgas, 1995). Tugade and Fredrickson discuss how each of these routes to regulating positive emotions, and their synergistic working can serve as mechanisms of resilience.

Their review was not exhaustive as there is theory and data on other strategies to enhance positive emotions including accepting emotional experiences without judgment or struggles to change them (even if they are undesirable), engaging in various spiritual thoughts and behaviors, cognitive reappraisal, seeking social support or contact, and more specific behaviors such as exercising, listening to music, having sex, humor, eating, and alcohol and drug use. None of these regulatory strategies are intrinsically good or bad, and their effectiveness will be a function of person-situation-strategy fit.

Fitting with predominant emotion regulation frameworks, there is an explicit assumption that individuals generally prefer to be in pleasant states (Larsen, 2000). Of course, there are personal and contextual factors to take into consideration as there are times when current or even undesirable states are preferable (e.g., Erber and Erber, 2000). For example, although individuals have a natural inclination to grow, learn, and explore, there are times when reflection and inaction is preferable in order to adequately integrate information and experiences into some degree of coherence. Tugade and Fredrickson offer several research ideas to further uncover the boundaries, processes, patterns, and meaningful individual differences that moderate the regulation of positive experiences. Despite the progress reviewed in their article, significant advances are needed to address individual differences and contextual influences on the use and effectiveness of emotion regulatory strategies.

As the empirical evidence accumulates on the nature of emotion regulation and positive health, more specific strategies

and outcomes are being developed theoretically and empirically. Thoman, Sansone, and Pasupathi (this issue) explore how sharing experiences with other people can transform people's subjective experiences, making them more interesting and memorable. Their work is derived from a theoretical framework suggesting that the experience of interest does not only motivate individuals' to explore their environment, but also serves the purpose of initiating and maintaining goal persistent behavior (Sansone and Smith, 2000). If an activity is interesting then an individual is intrinsically motivated and has virtually no difficulty investing time, energy, and effort. In contrast, if an activity is tedious or boring, it is difficult to persist and not quit. However, in their model, if an activity is boring but it is personally important to persist, then individuals are motivated to regulate the activity to make it more interesting, thereby, making it easier to persist and enjoy the ongoing process (and not just the outcome). Thoman et al. further explored this model by examining how activities might be experienced and remembered more positively if it is shared with other people, thereby serving as a stronger source of present and future mood boosting effects (during moments of reminiscing). Evidence from two studies suggested how other people can serve as a source of interest in an activity, increasing task interest and pleasure in the immediate present and periods of recall and savoring in the future. When the activity was shared with distracted listeners, interest declined over time, implying that the self-regulatory benefit of others only appears to operate when listeners are attentive. The psychological consequences of this relatively unexplored self-regulatory process may be quite extensive. If sharing an activity with others changes how an individual evaluates their experiences by making activities more or less interesting, then over time, this may enhance an individuals' self-efficacy and psychological well-being. After all, an individuals' well-being is partially derived from interpretations of personal life experiences and the narrative in which they are woven (Rogers, 1961). Thoman et al. not only elucidate a potentially valuable emotion regulatory strategy, but they also explore some of the necessary conditions for it to operate effectively.

Coifman and Bonanno (this issue) explore the relation between resilience and affective complexity in adults bereaving the loss of either a spouse or child. The key question they address is whether resilient individuals, defined by symptoms in the normal range of functioning following their loss, report greater precision and specificity in their affective experiences compared to symptomatic, bereaved individuals. Resilient individuals are defined by an outcome trajectory involving no more than a brief surge in distress, followed by a period of normal psychological functioning (punctuated by only minor fluctuations in distress). These individuals clearly possess extremely stable patterns of emotional responding or demonstrate extremely effective self-regulation strategies. By using a group of individuals in the context of the penultimate negative life event, the nature of resilience was able to be decomposed to evaluate the features that promote, maintain, and characterize positive health in the face of adversity. The data supported a model suggesting that resilient individuals possess a broader repertoire of emotional experiences such that positive and negative emotions are more independent. Additionally, the degree to which affective complexity was greater in resilient compared to symptomatic bereaved individuals was independent of the variance attributable to general distress.

The specific, functional utility of positive emotions are more likely to be capitalized by individuals reporting greater differentiation between positive and negative states (as opposed to individuals narrowly experiencing emotion on a single bipolar continuum from “bad” to “good”). Greater affective complexity implies that the experience of positive emotional states such as laughter or enjoyment is not dependent on the absence of despair, depression, or other negative emotional states (Keltner and Bonanno, 1997). To some extent, the construct of affective complexity is an index of the ability to flexibly respond to different life events and situational challenges (psychological flexibility). More sophisticated models of emotional experience such as within-person correlations between different affects can allow for advances in how self-regulatory resources change in response to coping and thriving, the mechanisms inherent to resilient trajectories, and the respective role of affective complexity in psychological and social functioning.

Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, and Salovey (this issue) examined individual differences in the strategies and successfulness of regulating anger compared to sadness when these emotions were felt toward a close friend. A subsidiary issue was whether the successful regulation of anger compared to sadness was associated with different functional outcomes. Their article addressed several important, neglected issues including the assessment of effective mood regulation, theoretically meaningful individual difference variables (emotional intelligence, sex) that might relate to strategy use and success, and potential differences in emotion regulation as a function of the discrete emotion experienced (see Larsen, 2000 for these and related lines of inquiry). An interesting methodological advance was the use of expert raters to code autobiographical episode of anger or sadness for (1) the effectiveness of mood regulation strategies as defined by reducing the emotion, preserving social relationships, and maintaining well-being and (2) the type of strategies utilized. Their findings suggest that individuals regulate sadness and anger with relatively different strategies; an individuals' ability to successfully regulate sadness is only moderately positively correlated with the ability to regulate anger; the effectiveness of regulating sadness is associated with more satisfying and meaningful social relationships whereas the effectiveness of regulating anger regulation is associated with greater conflict resolution skills (different functional outcomes); and both emotional intelligence (measured with a skill-based task) and sex were related to strategy use and effectiveness. This line of inquiry provides evidence for the important roles of differential person characteristics, strategy type, and target emotions to understand the emotion generative and regulatory process.

Extending a growing body of work, each of the papers in this issue provided new information on how, why, and when individuals engage in specific strategies to modify or alter their subjective experiences to attain functional outcomes. As reviewed in this issue, self-regulatory strategies are essential to repairing negative moods, creating and sustaining positive moods, and ensuring optimal motivation and functioning when needed or desired. The three empirical studies in this issue examined

emotion regulation in the context of several methodologies including autobiographical memory tasks, social interaction tasks with confederates engaging in experimentally manipulated behaviors, longitudinal designs, patterns of intra-individual affect relationships, the use of clinical expert ratings, and skill-based assessments.

The work involving emotion regulation, particularly positive emotions, and the influence on positive health continues to evolve. The contributions to this special issue should continue to stimulate additional work in this area and perhaps extend to other domains of psychological and interpersonal functioning.

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