

Deconstructing Emotion Regulation from an Interpersonal Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of “affect revolution” has transfigured the trajectory of emotional development. It has been the focus of research across multiple disciplines. The most significant and emerging concept in understanding emotional regulation is that of Interpersonal emotional regulation and its dynamism with the social environment. The current study takes a narrative review approach to present a framework for understanding the interpersonal nature of emotional regulation. This article is an attempt to synthesize and conceptualize Interpersonal Emotional Regulation, the dynamism of Intrapersonal v/s Interpersonal Regulation, and Understanding the Social Nature of emotion regulation. The penultimate section discusses the developmental and theoretical framework of interpersonal regulation. The different tools to measure and quantify interpersonal regulation and potential future areas of research conclude the review.

Keywords: Emotions, Emotion Regulation, Interpersonal Emotion Regulation.

INTRODUCTION

Our daily life is nothing less than an emotional roller coaster ride wherein we experience a variety of emotions. Emotions are functional and evolutionary which help in human survival (Frijda, 1986; Ekman and Davidson, 1994; Oatley and Jenkins, 2003), however, if unregulated they can be detrimental to psychological health and well-being (Aldao et al., 2010). Emotion regulation (ER) or the ability to manage one's emotions, has always been an intriguing concept as it is directly linked with personal wellbeing and helps an individual to effectively navigate their social world. Learning how to regulate and manage our emotions is a lifelong process. While the traditional models of ER have focused more on individual factors involved in the management and modulation of emotions, contemporary models of emotion regulation have argued that

emotions tend to have a social basis, thereby placing importance on contextual factors. Research suggests that social context plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of ER strategies (Bonanno & Burton, 2013) and regulation of emotions occurs in the social context not only in childhood, as is often assumed, but throughout the life span (Niven et al., 2009). However, a review of the literature shows that when exploring the concept of emotion regulation in general and its strategies in particular, cognitive and neurological processes were given more consideration thereby ignoring the social aspect of emotion regulation. Understanding the socio-cultural approach to ER which places importance on an individual's environment in the development of ER skills is equally important as “humans by nature are social beings and experience, expression and regulation of emotions occur

more or less in an interpersonal context” (Zaki & Williams, 2003).

This social nature of emotion regulation becomes evident in the concept of interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) which is still an under-researched topic lacking conceptual clarity. IER though an important process in our emotional repertoire and evident in our daily functioning has to date focused, mostly on couple relations and dynamics leading to confusion with some similar-sounding concepts like co-regulation, and relationship-focused coping; complicating further the systematic review of IER as a separate entity (Butler & Gross, 2009). Therefore, this review article takes a narrative review approach to understand the theoretical and conceptual framework of an interpersonal mode of emotion regulation that focuses on how people regulate their own and other people’s emotions in their environment.

Method

A narrative review approach was taken in the present study wherein papers focusing on IER as a process were reviewed to get an understanding of the concept. The electronic search included two databases, PubMed and Google Scholar and the search terms used were: interpersonal emotion regulation, intrapersonal emotion regulation, social nature of emotion regulation, and emotion regulation process. The inclusion criteria were: all types of articles on interpersonal emotion regulation. The exclusion criteria were: articles for which only the abstract was available, and was not in the English language. The cited references in the retrieved articles were used to get further resources.

Concept review

Social Perspective on Emotion Regulation

Darwin (1955) in “The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals” saw emotions to be serving an important communicative function, closely linked to an individual’s social system and playing an important role in social

communication. Beckes et al. (2011) further suggested that “individuals require external, social awareness to experience emotions and engage in emotion regulation”. Coan (2015) in his Social Baseline Theory (SBT) states that “the human brain acts under the assumption that it is in a social environment, i.e., proximity to others or groups is the expected baseline environment for humans”. There is evidence in the literature that emotions help to bind social lives by helping in the formation and maintenance of relationships (Van Kleef, 2016). Social factors like group membership, social norms, etc. play an important role in determining how emotions are regulated by individuals (Van Kleef, 2016; Fischer & Evers, 2011). Furthermore, it has been seen that individuals with emotion dysregulation tend to experience lesser positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003) are unable to connect to others (Butler, 2018), and have poor communication skills (Lopes, et. al., 2005).

Over the last few years, the social nature of emotion regulation i.e., how one’s emotions are influenced by others, how they are moderated in a social environment in adherence to the social norms, and how they influence our interpersonal functioning has triggered the curiosity of researchers. The support for the social aspect of ER further comes from studies done on ER during infancy and childhood. Literature in the field of developmental psychology focusing on attachment theories and early- interaction between caregiver and infant has pointed toward the fact that emotion regulation has a social and interpersonal component attached to it. Bowlby (1969) in his research on attachment found that children use a secure base to regulate their emotions while they are exploring the world around them. Eventually, emotion regulation becomes a fundamental component helping in the socialization process between the ages of 3 and 6. Further, parent-child interaction wherein the child receives various verbal and non-verbal inputs from the caregiver in the form of expressions, reactions, voice tone, etc. aids in this socialization and emotion regulation process (Eisenberg et. al, 2002; Morris et al, 2007). Thus, the development of emotion

regulation as a social process starts very early in life and one's social interactions at different levels then determine what interpersonal or emotion regulation skills and strategies will be used by an individual in the future.

The dynamism of Intrapersonal v/s Interpersonal Regulation

Before understanding interpersonal ER, it becomes important to differentiate it from the intrapersonal or as we call the cognitive mode of emotion regulation. Dixon-Gordon, et al. (2015) were of the view that “the conceptualization and operationalization of the concept of IER still being in its infancy phase shows a lot of heterogeneity.” They further said that intrapersonal and interpersonal ER tends to exist on a continuum with a lack of clear boundary separating them from one another thereby making the study of interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) challenging at times.

One of the earliest conceptualizations of the intrapersonal process of emotion regulation was given by Gross (1998) who defined intrapersonal emotion regulation as “regulation taking place within an individual, how people internally manage, experience, and express their affective states making use of different cognitive skills or strategies such as reappraisal, thought suppression, etc.” He further stated that intrapersonal processes focus on how an isolated individual would try to modify the type, intensity, and expression of an emotional experience. Gross (1998) came up with his highly influential “process model” of intrapersonal emotion regulation according to which emotions can be regulated using 5 different strategies as seen in figure 1.

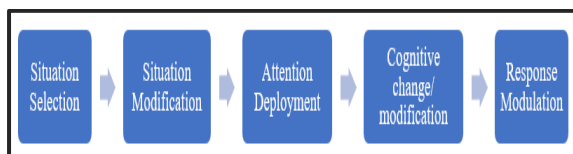


Figure 1: Showing “process model by Gross” (1998)

In Gross's model, the decision regarding the experience, management, and response to various emotional stimuli lies completely in the hands of the person undergoing it independent

of their social environment. This is what makes intrapersonal regulation distinct from the concept of interpersonal regulation as in interpersonal ER the strategies that we use to regulate our emotions are influenced by our social context.

Human beings are social by nature and this defining characteristic of theirs often makes them regulate themselves and their emotions within a social context. E.g., when people face stressful situations in their life they are often seen sharing and disclosing their emotional experiences with others, seeking out the company and support of their social network (Rimé, 2009). Even at the time of distress presence of a supportive social network and significant others tends to serve as a protective factor in helping individuals cope better with their problems. A component found to be missing in the intrapersonal process. The concept of interpersonal emotion regulation thus focuses on how emotional goals are pursued through social processes. Managing one's emotions through the process of IER involves perceiving other persons' mind to predict and infer from other people's experiences whether and how to disclose one's emotion (Gross et al, 2017). Thus, IER also like intrapersonal ER is a goal-directed process, however, what makes it unique and different is that it requires the presence of other people (Rime, 2009).

Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Defining the concept

Rime (2007) defined IER as “an individual's desire to share their emotional states with others”. Niven, Totterdell, & Holman (2009) saw it as “a process that aims to motivate an individual to change the affective states of others or social interactions that are intended to improve or worsen the emotions of others”. Zaki and Williams (2013) defined IER as “regulatory episodes that transpire within live social interactions”. It is the self-regulation of emotions that happens within a social context and often serves a communicative function (Hofmann, 2014). According to Bargh (2014), it is an “intentional, controlled, resource-

intensive process which is engaged with conscious awareness”. Coan (2015) defined it as “a reduction in negative affect in the presence of others”. The common theme observed across these definitions is that it’s a goal-directed process, requiring the presence of others. Regulation of emotions in a social setting is often a two-way process where we not only manage our emotions with the help of others, rather we also influence the way others regulate their emotions. Thus, IER has a duality attached to it.

Conceptual framework

Conceptualizing IER as a process has always been a challenging task and has seen disagreement between researchers. To understand the IER process, two important models of IER were developed, one by Niven, Totterdell, and Holman (2009) and the second one by Zaki and Williams (2013). The model

given by Niven et al (2009) which sees IER as an extrinsic process focusing more on regulating and influencing the emotions of others, consists of two dimensions. First, is the “expectation of the regulator” i.e., whether the regulator wants to engage in the IER process to influence the target’s emotion in positive or negative ways. The second dimension focuses on whether the regulator actually tries to change, based on the feedback, or just accepts or rejects the targets feeling altogether. Zaki and William’s (2013) model on the other hand conceptualizes the IER process across two dimensions or orthogonal processes as seen in figure 2. The first dimension focuses on the “target of regulation” i.e., whether the target of the IER process is self (as seen in intrinsic IER) or is it another person (as seen in extrinsic IER). The second dimension focuses on whether the process is “response-dependent or response- independent” meaning, whether the feedback from the other person is necessary or not.

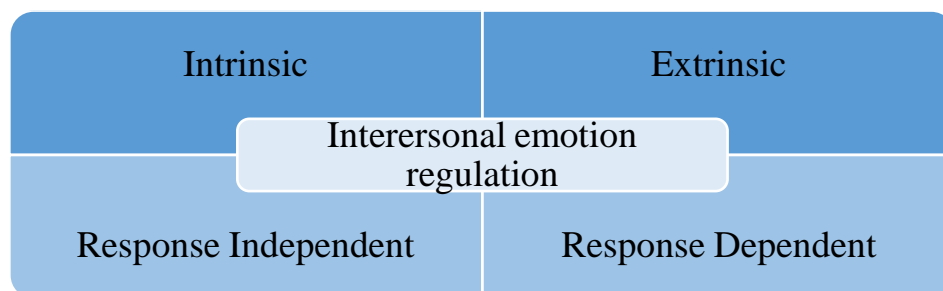


Figure 2: showing dimensions of “Zaki and William’s IER model (2013)”

In intrinsic interpersonal regulation, the regulator initiates the social contact to regulate their own emotional experience. Thus, here the target is an individual’s own emotions. Seeking out the company of friends to manage one’s own emotions is an example of intrinsic IER. Extrinsic interpersonal regulation on the other hand involves the regulator regulating another person’s emotions. Thus, here the emotions of others act as a target or goal of the IER process. Therefore, when our friend helps us to come out of a negative emotional state by cracking jokes, giving reassurance, etc., they are engaging in extrinsic IER. “Research on IER in the past has focused more on the extrinsic process (Turliuc & Jitaru, 2019).

The intrinsic and extrinsic IER can be either response-dependent wherein, the process relies on a particular response or feedback from another person as in the case, where a person might feel better after expressing his/her emotion only if the other person responds supportively or it can be response independent where, an interaction partner is not required to provide any feedback as in the case where the regulator might label his emotions while interacting with another person which in turn can help him regulate his emotions without a specific response from the other person. The conceptualization of IER as a process has been challenging due to the confusion among researchers as to whether to see interpersonal

regulation as an intrinsic or extrinsic process or rather, a combination of both.

Niven et al. (2017), further highlighted four characteristics of IER. First that IER is a regulatory, goal-directed process. Secondly, IER has an affective target which means that engaging in the process influences the feelings of the target. Thirdly, there is a social target which is to regulate the emotions of others. Lastly, it is an intentional act, controlled and engaged in with conscious awareness. However, some of these characteristics showed some contradiction to those given by other authors. Previously it was seen that IER as a process can even happen without the deliberate intention of the regulator, this then challenges the fourth characteristic of intentionality proposed by Niven. Similarly, Zaki and Williams (2013) differentiated between intrinsic and extrinsic IER, which tends to go against the idea proposed by Niven. According to Zaki & Williams (2013) “intrinsic IER is the process through which an individual regulates his own emotions by seeking contact with another person.” This process is deliberate, but the nature of the target changes from others to self, thus losing the intentionality from the regulator’s part (Turliuc & Jitaru, 2019). The concept of intrinsic IER given by Zaki and William might not fit in the concept of IER given by Niven due to a conceptual overlap with intrapersonal ER. Therefore, currently, there are some inconsistencies in the theory of IER (Hofmann et al., 2016). The main inconsistency observed in the IER theory concerns the intrinsic IER from Zaki’s and Williams’ model which somewhere looks similar to intrapersonal ER.

Significance of IER

Exploring the concept of IER is important as it will help in understanding how we can make use of our interpersonal relations and social setting to manage our emotions efficiently thereby enhancing our psychological well-being. The benefits of adequate and timely usage of appropriate IER strategies are evident in the findings of studies which showed that people who use IER strategies were found to be more popular in both professional and personal

realms as well as in virtual and face to face interactions (Petisca, Dias & Paiva, 2015). Dias & Paiva (2005) in their study found that an individual is perceived more positively if they use strategies to regulate the emotions of others like providing intimacy, validating the emotions of others, etc. IER thus helps an individual to form and maintain different relations in their life, whether it be at a personal or professional level. Research further shows that interpersonal difficulties and problems with emotional regulation are an underlying component in various mental health issues, including depression (Joormann & Stanton, 2016), anxiety disorders (Cisler & Olatunji, 2012), personality disorders (Dixon-Gordon et al., 2017; Hatkevich, Penner & Sharp, 2019). Interpersonal processes have a lifelong influence in shaping and framing our emotion regulation process thus, focusing just on the intrapersonal processes, which tend to operate as an input-output system would be to delimit it.

Measuring IER

While studying interpersonal processes involved in emotion regulation dearth of valid and reliable quantitative tools could be seen. A lot of qualitative and narrative techniques were used to assess the IER process which creates problems in drawing definitive conclusions. Currently, there are only two validated tools for measuring IER as a process. The first scale was developed by Niven et al. (2011) and is known as the Emotion Regulation of Others and Self scale (EROS). It assesses both intrapersonal and interpersonal components of emotion regulation. Here in this scale, the regulation is measured across 4 subscales: intrapersonal affect-improving (i.e., deliberately improving one’s affect); intrapersonal affect-worsening (i.e., deliberately worsening one’s affect), interpersonal affect-improving (i.e., deliberately improving another’s affect); and interpersonal affect-worsening (i.e., deliberately worsening another’s affect). This scale is based on Niven et al., conception of IER wherein they consider intrinsic IER as nothing but an intrapersonal process rather than considering it to be an interpersonal process. However, there is a lack of solid research

supporting the reliability and validity of this scale especially when it comes to the theoretical foundation of the affect worsening dimension of the scale. Even the items under the dimension of affect improving are not found to be meeting the expected validity criteria (Hofmann et al., 2016). Keeping in mind these limitations Hofmann and colleagues (2016) took an empirical and qualitative approach and came up with their tool the “Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (IERQ)”. The theoretical basis of this scale is that it tends to measure the intrinsic IER process as defined by Zaki and Williams (2013). Hence, here the focus is on how individuals regulate their own emotions by depending on others without the direct intention of extracting that regulation. IERQ does not approach the extrinsic IER process which deals with the regulation of another person’s emotionality. Furthermore, the response-dependent and response-independent regulation processes which are demarcations of intrinsic IER as seen in the Zaki and Williams model have both been included while developing this scale making it a comprehensive tool.

Recent research on IER

A review of recent literature on IER shows that studies are still attempting to explore the various psycho-social correlates of IER. Zaki (2020) in his recent study on IER has tried to understand the relation between IER and prosocial behavior. The study focused on exploring the intersection between empathy and IER across close relationships, professional caregiving, and group-based emotions. A study by Jitaru (2020) tried exploring the association between IER and couple satisfaction from a dyadic perspective. It examines the link between interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (from the model developed by Niven and colleagues in 2009) and couple satisfaction while working with distinguished dyads and taking into account both women's and men's experiences. The study pointed out that for both women and men, there are positive links between affect-improving strategies and couple satisfaction, and negative links between affect-worsening strategies and couple satisfaction.

One of the studies (Messina et al, 2021) tried exploring the use of IER strategies in group therapy. The study has also tried to explore motives as one of the variables influencing the use of IER strategies. A review of present-day work on IER shows that somewhere the focus on IER has still been from an organizational or couple perspective. One of the most innovative research studies in the field of IER done recently is exploring whether replacing traditional methods with artificial intelligence-based emotion identification software to assist service employees to identify and manage their customer emotions was more helpful or not. The study (Alexander et al., 2020) done on call center employees showed that the group that worked with the help of AI software performed better in customer interaction and satisfaction compared to the control group that followed the routine or traditional approach. Further, it was found that the AI-based software also helped the employees to understand and regulate their own interpersonal emotions far better thereby improving their affective well-being. These recent innovations in the field of IER thus point toward the importance of learning IER skills for general well-being as well as adequate functioning in the social sphere.

Conclusion

Studying interpersonal processes involved in emotion regulation is important given that relationships play critical roles in many aspects of our lives, beginning as children when we develop bonds with our parents, continuing through adolescence, as our peer groups become more prominent, and extending into adulthood, as we develop romantic relationships. Furthermore, emotion regulation difficulties especially in the interpersonal context form one of the core components of various psychological and mental health issues making it important in ER literature to thus focus on understanding how people use or maybe even fail to use their social relationships to effectively regulate their emotions (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Chen & Liao, 2019). Thus, it would not be wrong to say that IER in today’s world is a life skill that if learned can

go a long way in helping individuals manage their emotions in a healthier way keeping up with the situational demands, and enhancing their overall well-being.

Future directions

Work on IER is still at an infancy stage and questions such as, how often people engage in IER, what motivates its use and how well it works require clarity. IER as a process of emotion regulation has attracted the attention of many researchers in the last few years, however, there still isn't a cohesive theory that binds this process together. Thus, future studies can look into exploring the components or correlates of the IER process (role of personality, age, motives, culture, parenting styles, attachment, etc.), the role of different IER strategies, the interplay of personal and social components in regulating emotion regulation, factors affecting the adequate application of IER strategies, IER and psychological well-being. Furthermore, research on cultural differences in IER (Liddell & Williams, 2019) has shown that engaging in IER strategies tends to be more beneficial for East Asian Groups compared to the Western European groups when faced with stressful situations as it is congruent with their cultural background. This finding along with the scantness of research on IER in the Indian context makes it even more important to understand the concept of IER in the Indian scenario.

Limitations

The current study followed a narrative review approach hence, it took a less formal approach than a systematic review. The subjective bias in the selection of the studies for the literature review could also be another limitation. Another limitation was that the electronic search database was limited to two sources which further restricts the review.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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