What Do People Want to Feel and Why?

Pleasure and Utility in Emotion Regulation

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ABSTRACT—*It is typically assumed that people always want to feel good. Recent evidence, however, demonstrates that people want to feel unpleasant emotions, such as anger or fear, when these emotions promote the attainment of their long-term goals. If emotions are regulated for instrumental reasons, people should want to feel pleasant emotions when immediate benefits outweigh future benefits, but when future benefits outweigh immediate benefits, people may prefer to feel useful emotions, even if they are unpleasant. In this article, I describe an instrumental account of emotion regulation, review empirical evidence relevant to it, and discuss its implications for promoting adaptive emotional experiences.*

KEYWORDS—*emotion regulation; self-regulation; emotion; motivation*

Research on emotion regulation has focused on *how* people modify their feelings, but little research has examined *why* people do so. People regulate their emotions to feel a certain way. Such desired emotional states (i.e., emotional preferences) set the course for the entire process of emotion regulation. It is crucial, therefore, to understand what people want to feel and why.

People want to maximize immediate pleasure. Therefore, they want to feel pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant ones. The emphasis on short-term pleasure has dominated research on emotion regulation. However, people also want to maximize utility (i.e., long-term pleasure; Bentham, 1823/1968). Therefore, they may also want to feel emotions that are useful (not merely pleasurable) and avoid harmful ones. The approach that views emotion regulation as instrumental proposes that what people want to feel depends on both pleasure and utility

(see Fig. 1). When immediate benefits (i.e., immediate pleasure) outweigh long-term benefits (i.e., delayed pleasure derived from successful goal pursuit), people should prefer pleasant emotions. When long-term benefits outweigh immediate ones, people should prefer useful emotions. The balance between immediate and long-term benefits, in turn, depends on the goals people pursue. This article describes the instrumental account, reviews empirical evidence for it, and highlights its potential to inform our understanding of emotion and its regulation.

AN INSTRUMENTAL ACCOUNT OF EMOTION REGULATION

To identify what motivates people to regulate their emotions, the instrumental account integrates research on self-regulation with research on emotion. The account emphasizes that emotion regulation is a domain of self-regulation, and thus that the principles that guide self-regulation, broadly construed, should also guide the regulation of emotion, in particular.

Emotions involve pleasure or displeasure. Emotions can also be useful or harmful for successful goal pursuit. By simultaneously recruiting multiple systems (e.g., motivation, cognition, physiology), emotions predispose people to act in goal-conducive ways (Frijda, 1986). For example, by activating the sympathetic nervous system and promoting attention to threat, fear can promote successful avoidance. In fact, fear may be more useful for avoidance than any one specific behavior (e.g., being vigilant), because it triggers many goal-related processes. Because emotions provide both pleasure and utility, people may want to feel an emotion to maximize immediate pleasure, utility, or both.

When people pursue instrumental goals (i.e., goals that secure delayed rather than immediate reinforcement), they are willing to forgo immediate pleasure to maximize utility (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). For instance, although studying hard is often unpleasant, students may want to do so when pursuing academic success. According to the instrumental account,

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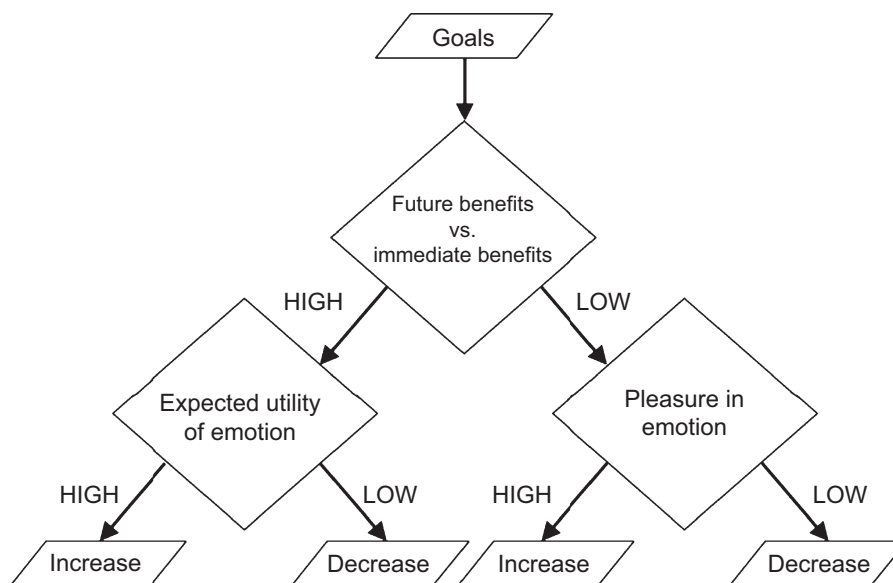
Fig. 1. The role of pleasure and utility in determining emotional preferences. According to the instrumental account, the goals people pursue affect the balance between immediate benefits (e.g., immediate pleasure) and long-term benefits (e.g., delayed pleasure derived from successful goal pursuit). When immediate benefits outweigh long-term benefits, the degree to which emotions are pleasant is a stronger determinant of emotional preferences, such that people should prefer to increase pleasant emotions and decrease unpleasant ones. However, when long-term benefits outweigh immediate benefits, the utility of emotions is a stronger determinant of emotional preferences, such that people should prefer to increase useful emotions and decrease harmful ones.

although unpleasant emotions are unpleasant to experience, people may want to experience them when pursuing a goal that unpleasant emotions can promote.

"Wanting," in this respect, refers to seeking stimuli that promote goal attainment (i.e., that are useful) and is conceptually and neurologically distinct from "liking," which refers to seeking stimuli that produce immediate pleasure (Berridge & Robinson, 2003). Wanting can be conscious or unconscious, depending on the factors that give rise to it (e.g., cognitive reasoning or implicit learning, respectively). Thus, people may want certain emotions whether they like them or not. What people want to feel is not necessarily based on rational choice. Indeed, emotional preferences can sometimes be irrational—for example, when one over- or underestimates the potential utility of an emotion.

The utility of behaviors depends on the goal people pursue. For instance, studying hard can be useful when students are motivated to succeed academically. Therefore, when students pursue academic success they want to study hard. The utility of emotions likewise depends on the goal people pursue. For instance, the experience of fear can be useful when people are motivated to avoid threats. Therefore, from an instrumental approach, when people are motivated to avoid threats, they may want to feel fear and regulate their feelings accordingly.

Because the future is uncertain, preferences rely on expectancies, such that people prefer stimuli they expect to be useful (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The more students motivated to succeed academically expect studying hard to promote academic success, the more they want to study hard. Similarly, according to the instrumental account, the more people who are motivated to avoid threats expect fear to promote successful avoidance, the more they should want to feel fear. The following sections review empirical evidence in support of these predictions.

PEOPLE DIFFER IN WHAT THEY WANT TO FEEL

People pursue different goals and therefore should vary in the emotions they prefer to feel in particular situations. For instance, individuals high in neuroticism are typically motivated to avoid threats (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Emotions such as fear or worry can be useful for successful avoidance (Carver, 2001). Therefore, individuals high in neuroticism should prefer to feel fear or worry when anticipating possible threats. Indeed, I found that individuals higher in neuroticism preferred to increase their worry before taking a test (Tamir, 2005), a task they were likely to perceive as threatening. Furthermore, feeling worried when taking a test enhanced their performance.

Similarly, individuals high in extraversion are typically motivated to approach rewards (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Emotions such as happiness or excitement can be useful for successful approach (Carver, 2001). Therefore, individuals high in extraversion should prefer to feel happy or excited when anticipating possible rewards. Indeed, I found that individuals higher in

extraversion preferred to increase their happiness before taking a test (Tamir, in press), a situation they were likely to perceive as rewarding.

Other individual differences in emotional preferences have been demonstrated, for example, as a function of age (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003), self-esteem (e.g., Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003), and culture (Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Yeung, 2007). For instance, consistent with the instrumental account, older adults are more likely than younger adults to seek pleasant emotions, possibly because as one ages, immediate benefits become more salient than long-term benefits. Such individual differences appear to be goal related and, therefore, may be context dependent. Overall, there is evidence that people differ in what they want to feel in certain contexts and that such differences are linked to the goals they pursue.

WHEN FEELING BAD IS GOOD: GOALS AND EMOTIONAL PREFERENCES

Different situations give rise to different goals. Therefore, emotional preferences should vary by context. Erber, Wegner, and Therriault (1996) provided evidence for this idea, showing that participants preferred to neutralize their feelings before interacting with a stranger. Cases in which people want to feel unpleasant emotions, however, provide the strongest test of the instrumental account of emotion regulation, because in such cases immediate pleasure diametrically contrasts with utility. Consequently, subsequent studies tested whether people prefer to experience unpleasant emotions when they are useful.

Anger should promote the pursuit of confrontational goals (Frijda, 1986), so Tamir, Mitchell, and Gross (2008) tested whether people wanted to feel angry when preparing for confrontation. Participants were told that the study concerned memory and computer games and that they would either recall events or perform an unrelated activity (e.g., listen to music) before playing. To assess emotional preferences, participants indicated the extent to which they preferred to recall certain events (e.g., "an event in which you were angry") and listen to musical clips preselected by the experimenter to induce either anger, excitement, or neutral feelings before playing computer games that were described as either confrontational (e.g., killing enemies) or nonconfrontational (e.g., building an empire). Although participants expected anger-inducing activities to be unpleasant, they preferred to engage in them when expecting to play the confrontational, but not the nonconfrontational, game (see Fig. 2).

To test whether anger was useful for successful confrontation, we manipulated participants' emotional experiences by having them listen to angry, exciting, or neutral music. They then played both a confrontational and a nonconfrontational computer game and their performance was recorded. Angry participants performed better than others in the confrontational game, by killing more virtual enemies. They performed as well as others, how-
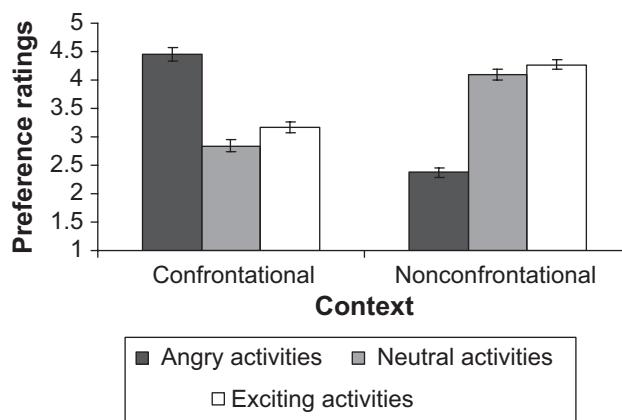
Fig. 2. Preferences for anger-inducing, neutral, and exciting activities when expecting to perform confrontational and nonconfrontational tasks (Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). People were likely to prefer anger-inducing activities (i.e., listening to anger-inducing music and recalling past events in which they were angry) when expecting to play a confrontational computer game (i.e., in which the the goal was to kill virtual enemies), but not when they expected to play a nonconfrontational game (i.e., in which the goal was to build an empire). This pattern did not depend on the nature of the activity that was rated (i.e., listening to music vs. recalling past events), suggesting that preferences were driven by the emotional tone of the activity.

ever, in the nonconfrontational game. These findings demonstrate that people may want to feel angry when anger can be useful.

Using a similar design, Tamir and Ford (in press) tested whether people wanted to feel afraid when preparing to avoid threats. As predicted, when participants expected to play computer games in which they had to avoid threats (e.g., escaping monsters), they preferred to engage in fear-inducing activities (e.g., listening to fearful music). In fact, the more participants expected an activity to make them afraid, the more they wanted to engage in it before playing the threatening game.

What people want to feel before playing a computer game in which they need to kill virtual enemies may or may not reflect what they want to feel when they need to confront a real person. Therefore, Tamir and Ford (2009) tested the predictions of the instrumental approach in the context of an interpersonal negotiation. Participants were told they would play the role of a landlord and negotiate with another participant, playing the role of a tenant who had not paid rent. Some were told that their goal was to get their money back immediately (i.e., a confrontational goal), some were told their goal was to maintain a long-term relationship with the tenant (i.e., a collaboration goal), while others were given no specific instructions (i.e., the control condition). Participants then indicated what film clips they would like to watch and what types of memories they would like to recall before the negotiation.

As predicted, participants in the collaboration-goal condition were more likely than others to prefer happiness-inducing activities, whereas participants in the confrontational-goal condition were more likely to prefer anger-inducing activities.

Consistent with our predictions, anger was more useful for confrontation, as angry participants were more likely than others to lead their interaction partners to concede to their demands. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that people want to feel emotions that may be useful for attaining their goals, even when those emotions are unpleasant.

EXPECTING FEELING BAD TO BE GOOD: EXPECTANCIES AND EMOTIONAL PREFERENCES

If utility underlies emotional preferences, people should prefer to feel an emotion when they expect it to be useful (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). To test this hypothesis, Tamir and Ford (2009) asked participants who prepared to negotiate with another participant how useful they expected certain emotions to be. As expected, preferences for anger were fully mediated by the expected utility of anger. Participants who prepared to confront another participant were more likely to expect anger to be useful and, therefore, were more likely to want to feel angry before the negotiation. Regardless of goal condition, participants who expected anger to be useful wanted to be angry, whereas those who expected happiness to be useful wanted to be happy, suggesting that people prefer emotions they expect to be useful, whether those emotions are actually useful or not.

MOTIVES IN EMOTION REGULATION: CONSCIOUS VERSUS UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES

Emotional preferences can be conscious and deliberate, yet people may not always be aware of the factors that determine what they want to feel. Although "wanting" typically refers to a conscious desire, it can also refer to an unconscious or implicit process (Berridge & Robinson, 2003). Expectancies, in particular, can often operate outside of consciousness (Roese & Sherman, 2007).

Tamir, Chiu, and Gross (2007) began to explore the link between implicit expectancies of emotional utility and emotional preferences. To assess unconscious expectancies, participants completed a computer task in which speed of response reflected the strength of associations between fear and utility when avoiding threats. In the task, participants read a sentence describing a goal (e.g., "My goal is to avoid failure") and imagined themselves pursuing it. Then an emotion term (e.g., "afraid") was flashed on the screen. Finally, participants saw a word or a meaningless string of letters and indicated whether this was a word or not. Words in this third part of the task reflected high or low utility (e.g., "useful" or "harmful," respectively).

People respond faster to a word when it follows another word that is associated with it, so we predicted that participants who expected fear to be useful for avoiding threats would respond faster to high-utility words than to low-utility words following fear words in the context of avoidance goals. Participants who showed such a pattern did not expect fear to be useful for

avoidance when asked about it explicitly. Nonetheless, they were significantly more likely to prefer fear-inducing activities before a threatening task. Thus, people may not necessarily be aware of why they want to feel certain emotions in certain situations. These findings are important, because if people are unaware of what determines their emotional preferences, they might have difficulty changing them.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Research on emotion regulation has been guided by the assumption that people want to feel pleasant and avoid unpleasant emotions. The instrumental account of emotion regulation qualifies this assumption and provides an explanatory framework that gives rise to alternative testable hypotheses.

The instrumental approach offers novel accounts of functional and dysfunctional emotion regulation. First, it highlights the benefits of promoting knowledge about the utility of emotions. If people know when particular emotions are useful, they may prefer and subsequently cultivate emotions that would help them attain their goals. Such knowledge should apply to pleasant and unpleasant emotions, each promoting unique sets of goals. Existing research examines the utility of emotions with respect to individual goals. Future research could examine the utility of emotions with respect to multiple, competing goals. For instance, if collaboration promotes long-term well-being more than competition does, happiness should be more useful over time than anger.

Second, the instrumental approach suggests that dysfunctional emotion regulation can result from wanting the "wrong" emotions. This could arise from pursuing goals that are inappropriate in a given context (e.g., confrontational goals when interacting with an intimate partner) or from inaccurate expectancies of emotional utility (e.g., expecting anger to be useful for bonding with an intimate partner). Future research will test these possibilities.

How do people know when particular emotions are useful? Such knowledge may be acquired through learning: Learning that an emotion is useful in one context should increase preferences for that emotion in that context. One implication of the instrumental account is that it allows for the possibility of change in emotional preferences. An exciting avenue for future research involves testing whether emotional preferences can be modified through basic learning mechanisms. For instance, can a person who prefers to feel angry to secure a partner's affection learn to prefer other feelings in that context that are less destructive? By asking such questions, the instrumental account holds the potential of promoting healthy emotional experiences.

Finally, much of the above research examined cases in which people wanted to feel unpleasant emotions. However, wanting and liking often co-occur and may be causally related (Berridge & Robinson, 2003). If utility drives pleasure (Cabanac, 1992) and varies by context, might the hedonic quality of emotions also

vary by context (e.g., Andrade & Cohen, 2007)? By positioning emotion regulation in the broader realm of self-regulation, the instrumental account promises to advance our understanding of emotion regulation and experience.

Recommended Readings

Bonanno, G.A. (2001). Emotion self-regulation. In T.J. Mayne & G.A. Bonanno (Eds.), *Emotions: Current issues and future directions* (pp. 251–285). New York: Guilford. An insightful chapter that lays the groundwork for the instrumental approach to emotion regulation, where emotion regulation is examined within the broader context of self-regulation.

Gross, J.J. (2007). *Handbook of emotion regulation*. New York: Guilford. Provides a comprehensive review of research in the field of emotion regulation.

Parrott, W.G. (1993). Beyond hedonism: Motives for inhibiting good moods and for maintaining bad moods. In D.M. Wegner & J.W. Pennebaker (Eds.), *Handbook of mental control* (pp. 278–305). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. The first ground-breaking paper to argue that people may be motivated, at times, to feel bad.

Tamir, M., Mitchell, C., & Gross, J.J. (2008). Hedonic and instrumental motives in anger regulation. *Psychological Science, 19*, 324–328. The first empirical demonstration that people want to feel unpleasant emotions when those emotions are useful.

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Tamir, M., & Ford, B. (2009). *When Feeling Bad Is Expected to Be Good: An Expectancy-Value Model of Emotion Regulation*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

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