Beyond Hedonism: Broadening the Scope of Affect Regulation

Edward R. Hirt and Sean M. McCrea
Department of Psychology
Indiana University-Bloomington

One principle which recent work in social psychology has continued to emphasize is that behavior is goal-directed (cf. Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996). Given that moods and emotions powerfully influence so many different aspects of our lives, it is no surprise that affect regulation is an important goal. Our basic assumption throughout this literature has been that people are motivated to feel good, so that they engage in mood-maintenance efforts when they are already in a positive mood, but engage in mood repair when in a negative mood. The simple picture painted by this general mood-management perspective is that people should attempt to regulate their affect by pursuing activities that make them feel positive. What the target articles emphasize is that this process of affect regulation is more complicated than has been previously assumed, leading to some provocative insights and developments.

The target articles share the perspective that mood regulation can be brought into a more general self-regulation framework. Our discussion focuses on how such a perspective yields two important propositions, both of which move us beyond a simple hedonistic principle. First, constraints may be placed on the pursuit of positive mood states. For example, the operation of other self-regulation goals beyond mood regulation, as well as individual differences in desired affective states, may in part determine the goal of mood-regulation efforts. Second, recent models of self-regulation emphasize that underlying motives determine how goals are pursued and the consequences of goal attainment or failure. We discuss each of these points and provide some further evidence for their importance in understanding mood regulation.

Affect Regulation Within the General Self-System

How is the process of affect regulation accomplished? Tice and Bratslavsky (this issue) characterize affect regulation as similar to other forms of self-control. Similarly, Larsen (this issue) proposes a model of affect regulation borrowing heavily on Carver and Scheier's (1982) cybernetic control model. According to this model, individuals respond to perceived discrepancies between their current state or environment and some standard by engaging in discrepancy-reducing actions to attempt to bring the system back to homeostasis. Applying this perspective to affect regulation, individuals map their current affective state onto a standard of comparison. If a mood-management perspective is correct, our standard of comparison is that we should want to feel positive. Thus, if we perceive our current affective state as discrepant from this standard, we should engage in discrepancy-reducing behaviors aimed at improving our affective state and bringing it more in line with our standards.

Despite the ubiquity of this general framework, there are many aspects that need to be specified further in applying it to affect regulation. First, how often do people reflect upon their current affective state and begin the comparison process? What internal or environmental factors lead the individual to attend to their current affective state? Larsen (this issue) discusses individual differences in affective reactivity (extroversion, neuroticism) as one moderator of this phase of the process, but it is clearly important to demarcate the conditions under which we become aware of our current emotional state and start the process. Second, the standard used during the comparison process is not universal. As Larsen points out, people have different set points, beliefs, and expectations about what is their optimal affective state (similar to differences in comparison level found with equity theory, cf. Rusbult, 1983). Similarly, the end goal of mood-regulation efforts could differ as a result of situationally based expectations. At a funeral or at a sad movie, we expect to feel sad, so that emotions that deviate from that set point will evoke discrepancy-reducing efforts to bring our emotions in line.

In addition to these individual differences, the operation of other self-regulation goals may influence the selection of particular affective goals. Erber and Erber's (this issue) social constraints model emphasizes that the criteria used to evaluate the appropriateness of one's current affective state depend largely upon the context (see also Martin & Stoner, 1996). For instance, the presence of others may render certain emotional expressions inappropriate. Their findings stress that individuals are strategic in their mood-regulation efforts with the purpose of ensuring smoother social interactions.

Tice and Bratslavsky (this issue) make a similar point in their treatment of self-control. Individuals may attempt to put aside mood considerations to satisfy other important goals, such as losing weight, controlling impulse buying, or quitting smoking. Sometimes these efforts will be successful, but often the importance of mood regulation causes failures in other forms

Copyright © 2001 All Rights Reserved

of self- control. Thus, Tice and Bratslavsky also make the point that satisfying important goals may place constraints on our ability to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

As a final example of this principle, recent work by Trope and colleagues (Trope & Neter, 1994; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998) has investigated the role of positive mood as a resource. They found that individuals in positive moods may actually be more willing to view negative feedback, provided that it is diagnostic of important abilities. According to Trope, positive moods allow individuals to satisfy self-assessment goals, such as learning about inadequacies, presumably with the hopes of improving these abilities. Thus, when the individual has already satisfied a mood-regulation goal, the pursuit of other goals can be accomplished.

In summary, the general desire to maintain a positive mood is constrained by a number of other factors. Individuals may desire to satisfy other goals that in turn determine the valence of mood-regulation efforts. Individual differences and situation-based expectations may also play a role in the selection of a set point for the desired affective state. This point underscores the fact that the fundamental assumption of a mood-management perspective needs to be broadened to include circumstances in which situations require negative emotional states as well as positive emotional states. A simple hedonistic principle does not capture these complexities.

Framing the Goal: The Role of Regulatory Focus

Beyond a consideration of the valence of the standard or desired end state, recent research has illustrated how the motives underlying the attainment of that goal state also have a profound influence. Specifically, Higgins's (1996, 1997) work on regulatory focus distinguishes between approach motives (or promotion focus), in which the individual moves toward desired end states, and avoidance motives (or prevention focus), in which the individual moves away from undesired end states. Promotion focus is associated with a looser, riskier processing style, which leads to feelings of elation when successful but dejection when unsuccessful. Prevention focus, on the other hand, is associated with a tighter, analytic processing style, which leads to feelings of relief when successful but anxiety and fear when unsuccessful.

Although Higgins's work has tended to examine affect as an outcome variable, one can easily extend this perspective to consider the possible interactions of regulatory focus and valence of the end state in the process of affect regulation. One could be motivated to approach a positive or desirable end state, or to avoid a negative or undesirable end state. Although both of these outcomes are consistent with a mood-management perspective, the implications of pursuing these different motives are quite distinct. Individuals moving toward a desirable end state need only determine a viable means of attaining this outcome, and then pursue that avenue successfully. In contrast, individuals moving away from an undesirable end state must determine all possible ways that this negative outcome could obtain. Successful avoidance requires carefully considering and preventing all routes to the negative outcome.

In most cases, when we consider affect regulation (or self-regulation in general, for that matter), we have focused on avoiding negative affective states. Individuals often try to eliminate the conditions that lead to the negative state. However, successful avoidance of a negative mood is often difficult. Indeed, the kind of effects that Tice and Bratslavsky (this issue) alluded to, in which individuals attempting to modulate their negative affect expend so much mental energy that they fail at other areas of self-control, is consistent with the literature showing the difficulties encountered when pursuing an avoidance strategy. Wegner's (1992) seminal work on thought suppression illustrates how trying not to think, do, or say some unwanted thought or action is not only difficult but can paradoxically result in a fixation on the target to be suppressed. However, this is only one way to conceptualize avoidance in affective regulation. Indeed, Wegener and Petty's (1994, 1996) hedonic contingency model stresses that positive mood individuals also engage in effortful affective regulation efforts to avoid loss of their positive mood state. Importantly, this model makes a novel prediction that positive mood individuals must be particularly sensitive to the hedonic qualities of potential situations because there are far more opportunities available that can threaten their (positive) mood than there are for negative mood individuals. In their research, Wegener and Petty (1994) demonstrated that happy individuals, when presented with a choice among various stimuli to view later in the experimental session, scrutinize the hedonic consequences of possible options more carefully than do sad individuals. Their work paradoxically suggests that people in positive moods actually have to work harder at mood management (to successfully avoid the loss of a desired mood state) than do people in negative moods. Happy people systematically avoid engaging in any tasks that could threaten or potentially sabotage their positive mood. Thus, positive mood individuals may take a prevention route to mood maintenance by avoiding potentially mood-threatening information.

In addition to prevention focus among both happy and distressed individuals, one can also consider a promotion focus to mood regulation. Once again, much of the attention has been given to the attempts of negative mood individuals to become happy. For example, one

can watch a funny movie or talk to an old friend to get into a better mood. Indeed, the literature on helping behavior (cf. Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976) shows that individuals learn at an early age that helping can be an effective strategy for mood repair. However, positive mood individuals may also maintain their mood in a manner more akin to promotion. Our own recent work provides a provocative illustration of mood promotion efforts among happy individuals (McDonald, Levine, Melton, & McCrea, 1997). We began by asking a basic question: Suppose happy individuals are in a situation in which they are unable to choose which task to pursue and are confronted with a negative task to perform. How will they react to this situation? Will these individuals simply withdraw from the task, putting minimal effort into it, to "cut their losses" in this mood-threatening situation? Will they instead put effort into the task and risk sabotaging their positive mood?

We addressed this question using a paradigm borrowed from Martin, Ward, Achee, and Wyer (1993). Participants were first induced into either a positive, neutral, or negative mood by having them watch a series of film clips under the guise of an experiment on rating films. After completing a brief intervening task, participants began a second and ostensibly unrelated experiment examining the "things that come to people's mind." In this experiment, participants were given a category of objects and were asked to list as many objects from that category as they could. Participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses could be as ordinary or as creative as they like. Participants were then given the category of objects they would generate. Half of the participants completed the generation task for a neutral valenced category of objects (modes of transportation), while the other half generated objects from a negatively valenced category (causes of death). The time spent at the task, the number of objects generated, and the creativity or originality of the items generated were assessed.

The results for the neutral category of objects fit well with previous research (Hirt, Levine, McDonald, Melton, & Martin, 1997; Hirt, Melton, McDonald, & Harackiewicz, 1996; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Isen, Johnson, Mertz, & Robinson, 1995). Happy individuals were more creative in their responses than were participants in the other mood conditions. Moreover, the pattern of results for the negative category of objects was identical to that observed with the neutral category—again, the positive mood individuals were more creative than were participants in the other mood conditions.

How might we explain this result from a mood-management perspective? A further examination of the items generated by individuals in the different mood states provided an important clue. Neutral and negative mood individuals tended to list items that were very straightforward—diseases, natural disasters, accidents, methods of capital punishment. In contrast, happy individuals showed a greater tendency to generate causes of death that were more sensational or even comical—legendary causes like Chinese water torture, spontaneous combustion, and the rack, or bizarre, "horror movie" types of causes like stakes through the heart, impalement by logs, and burrowing parasites. Clearly, it appears that happy individuals had construed the task in a playful manner such that it was no longer mood-threatening, despite the potentially negative content of this category. What this illustrated for us was the remarkable ability of happy individuals to transform a negative task into a positive one, in the service of mood maintenance. This type of mood-regulation effort may be more accurately thought of as indicative of a promotion focus, characterized by creativity and flexibility (cf. Murray, Sujan, Hirt, & Sujan, 1990).

Thus, there is evidence that happy individuals may regulate their mood by either systematically avoiding mood-threatening information, or by seeking a more enjoyable or comical perspective on negative tasks. Underlying the simple hedonistic principle then is a crucial difference in regulatory focus. The individual may be focused on achieving or maintaining a positive mood state. Alternatively, the individual may be focused on getting away from or preventing a negative mood state The different perspectives are likely to yield different goal-striving behaviors, and as Higgins (1996, 1997) showed, different affective consequences for the individual.

Summary

In conclusion, we discuss how thinking about mood regulation in terms of a more general self-regulation framework gets us beyond a simple hedonistic principle. Our first principle focuses on the point that because mood regulation is only one of many goals in the larger scope of the self-regulatory system, there are likely to be constraints placed on the desire to seek and maintain positive moods. The work discussed by the target articles emphasizes not only that variability might exist in desired end states (Larsen, this issue) but also that the role of other goals and situational constraints might interplay with affect regulation (Erber & Erber, this issue; Tice & Bratslavsky, this issue; and in addition, Trope & Neter, 1994; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998). As the work of these authors makes clear, such a perspective is likely to further our understanding of mood regulation greatly by identifying factors that determine the valence of the desired end state. Secondly, we suggest that a more general self-regulation perspective allows for a mapping of other theories of self-regulation onto mood regulation. One such framework has been put forth by Higgins (1996, 1997), which

again emphasizes the inadequacy of a simple hedonistic principle. Whereas previous work has tended to focus on how these different motives operate for individuals in a negative mood state, we discussed examples of each occurring among individuals in more positive moods. The work of Wegener and Petty (1994, 1996) as well as our own (Hirt, McDonald, Levine, Melton, & McCrea, 1997) provides examples of how individuals may regulate moods through either a prevention or a promotion focus. Thus, the operation of mood regulation may be somewhat orthogonal to the valence of one's current mood state. What these ideas suggest is that we must move beyond a consideration of whether people repair negative moods and maintain positive moods. Rather, we should examine how mood regulation fits into the larger self-system, and how the operation of goal structures guide and shape our affective experience

Note

Edward R. Hirt, Department of Psychology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405–6401. E-mail: ehirt@indiana.edu

References

Carver, C. S , & Scheier, M F (1982) Control theory A useful conceptual framework for personality-social, clinical, and health psychology *Psychological Bulletin, 92,* 111–135

Cialdini, R B , & Kenrick, D. T (1976) Altruism as hedonism A social development perspective on the relationship of negative mood state and helping *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 34,* 907–914

Gollwitzer, P M , & Bargh, J A. (1996) *The psychology of action Linking cognition and motivation to behavior* New York Guilford

Higgins, E T (1996) Emotional experiences The pains and pleasures of distinct regulatory systems In R. D Kavanaugh, B Zimmerberg, & S Fein (Eds), *Emotion Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp 203–241) Mahwah, NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc

Higgins, E T (1997). Beyond pleasure and pain *American Psychologist, 52,* 1280–1300

Hirt, E. R , Levine, G M , McDonald, H E., Melton, R J , & Martin, L L (1997). The role of mood in quantitative and qualitative aspects of performance Single or multiple mechanisms? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 33,* 602–629

Hirt, E R , McDonald, H E , Levine, G M , Melton, R. J , & McCrea, S. M (1997, May) The effects of happy mood on performance of an unpleasant task Laughing in the face of death Paper presented at the meeting of Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, IL

Hirt, E R , Melton, R J , McDonald, H E , & Harackiewicz, J M (1996) Processing goals, task interest, and the mood-performance relationship A mediational analysis *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71,* 245–261

Isen, A M , Daubman, K A , & Nowicki, G P (1987) Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52,* 1122–1131

Isen, A M , Johnson, M M S , Mertz, E , & Robinson, G F (1985) The influence of positive affect on the unusualness of word associations *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48,* 1413–1426

Martin, L L , & Stoner, P (1996) Mood as input What we think about how we feel determines how we think In L L Martin & A Tesser (Eds), *Striving and feeling Interactions among goals affect and self-regulation* (pp 279–301) Mahwah, NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc

Martin, L L , Ward, D W , Achee, J W , & Wyer, R S , Jr. (1993) Mood as input People have to interpret the motivational implications of their moods *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64,* 317–326

Murray, N , Sujan, H , Hirt, E R , & Sujan, M (1990) The influence of mood on categorization A cognitive flexibility interpretation *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59,* 411–425

Rusbult, C E (1983) A longitudinal test of the investment model. The development (and deterioration) of satisfaction and commitment in heterosexual involvements *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45,* 101–117

Trope, Y , & Neter, E (1994) Reconciling competing motives in self-evaluation The role of self-control in feedback seeking *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 66,* 646–657

Trope, Y , & Pomerantz, E (1998) Resolving conflicts among self-evaluative motives Positive experiences as a resource for overcoming defensiveness *Motivation and Emotion, 22,* 53–72

Wegener, D T , & Petty, R E (1994) Mood management across affective states The hedonic contingency hypothesis *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 66,* 1034–1048

Wegener, D T , & Petty, R E (1996) Effects of mood on persuasion processes Enhancing, reducing, and biasing scrutiny of attitude-relevant information In L L Martin & A Tesser (Eds), *Striving and feeling Interactions among goals, affect, and self-regulation* (pp 329–362) Mahwah, NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc

Wegner, D M (1992) You can't always think what you want Problems in the suppression of unwanted thoughts In M Zanna (Ed), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol 25, pp 193–225) San Diego Academic