
Article:
Niven, K. orcid.org/0000-0002-6675-5532, Troth, A.C. and Holman, D. (2019) Do the effects of interpersonal emotion regulation depend on people's underlying motives? Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 92 (4). pp. 1020-1026. ISSN 0963-1798

https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12257

DO THE EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL EMOTION REGULATION DEPEND ON PEOPLE'S UNDERLYING MOTIVES?

Attempts to improve others' feelings have positive consequences, while attempts to worsen others' feelings have negative consequences. But do such effects depend on the motives underlying these attempts? In an experimental study, we tested whether leaders' apparent motives influence the effects of their interpersonal emotion regulation on followers. We found that the positive effects of using affect-improving (vs. worsening) strategies on relational outcomes and discretional performance outcomes were largely enhanced when the leader exhibited prosocial motives but diminished when the leader exhibited egoistic motives. Our findings add nuance to our understanding of the effects of interpersonal emotion regulation at work.

Keywords. Interpersonal emotion regulation, emotion regulation, prosocial motivation, egoistic motivation, leader-follower relations, leadership

PRACTITIONER POINTS

- When leaders try to influence their followers' emotions, the consequences not only depend on the type of strategy used (improving vs. worsening), but also the leaders' apparent motives.
- If egoistic (vs. prosocial) motives underpin leaders' interpersonal emotional regulation, the positive effects of affect-improving (vs. worsening) on leader-follower relationship quality and follower discretional performance are significantly reduced.
- Leaders should be aware of the behaviours they use during interactions with their followers as well as how their motives might be perceived.

DO THE EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL EMOTION REGULATION DEPEND ON PEOPLE'S UNDERLYING MOTIVES?

Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) concerns deliberate attempts to influence other people's feelings (Niven, 2017). In the workplace, such attempts might include trying to make colleagues feel less anxious and trying to make followers feel more enthusiastic. Existing research suggests that IER influences the quality of work relationships (Niven, Holman, & Totterdell, 2012) and people's discretional performance, such as their citizenship behaviour (Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2016).

Research on the effects of IER has so far produced a rather simplistic picture, suggesting that attempts to improve others' emotions result in positive outcomes, while attempts to worsen others' emotions cause negative outcomes. This is consistent with Van Kleef's (2009) theory that emotional behaviours convey important social information about a person's goals, intentions, and attitudes, and the inferences that others make on the basis of this information duly affect the interpersonal consequences of such behaviour. Affect-improving strategies (e.g., praising a person) communicate positive information about the regulator's goals, intentions, and attitudes, which increases liking of the regulator and willingness to help them. Conversely, affect-worsening strategies (e.g., ignoring a person) communicate negative social information and so diminish liking and willingness to help.

However, the true story is likely to be more complex: not all attempts to improve others' emotions receive positive reactions (e.g., humour often backfires; Williams & Emich, 2014), and people may respond less negatively to some attempts to worsen their feelings (e.g., when people are 'cruel to be kind'; López-Pérez, Howells, & Gummerum, 2017). Here, we contribute a more nuanced understanding by arguing that the motives that underlie IER influence how others respond to IER (Niven, 2016).

In particular, we expect that the effects of IER will depend on whether IER appears to be engaged to benefit others, such as the organisation and its members (i.e., prosocially), or to benefit the regulator (i.e., egoistically). In the context of leadership, Dienesch and Liden (1986) argue that followers' attributions of leaders' motives influence how followers respond to leaders' behaviour. As Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) expand, this is because such attributions affect how followers evaluate leader sincerity. In line with this literature, we anticipate that when IER appears driven by prosocial motives, people are likely to evaluate the sincerity of the regulator's goals and intentions positively, translating into greater relationship quality and discretional performance. Conversely, when IER appears to be egoistically motivated, people will make less positive evaluations of regulator sincerity, translating to poorer outcomes. We therefore hypothesize:

IER motives will moderate the effects of IER strategies on relational outcomes and discretional performance outcomes, such that the positive effects of affect-improving versus worsening strategies are strengthened in the case of prosocial motives and weakened in the case of egoistic motives.

METHOD

We conducted a 2 (strategy type: improving vs. worsening) by 2 (motive type: prosocial vs. egoistic) between-persons experiment, manipulating our independent variables using a scenario to which participants were randomly assigned.

Participants

We recruited a sample of workers using ResearchNow, a company that provides online panels for researchers. Our sample comprised 249 participants (125 males, 124 females), aged between 16 and 74 (M = 45.27 years, SD = 14.22). Participants had an average of 24.50 years of employment (SD = 14.02 years), with 187 currently full-time employed and 62 part-time employed.

Procedure

Participants read one of four scenarios in which they were asked to imagine themselves having a discussion with their leader. We chose this context because IER is a core component of leadership that enables leaders to motivate good performance and prevent poor performance in followers (Humphrey, 2002). Participants then completed a series of measures capturing their responses to the scenario.

Manipulations and measures

IER scenarios

We designed four scenarios (Table 1), each of which began: "You are talking with your leader over a coffee". Strategy type was manipulated by describing the leader's behaviour during the interaction, using examples from Niven, Totterdell, and Holman's (2009) classification, and matching strategy types across improving and worsening conditions. Motives were manipulated by describing the character of the leader. To imply egoistic motives, we described the leader in Machiavellian terms, using adjectives pertaining to each of the four factors in Dahling, Whitaker, and Levy's (2009) measure. To imply prosocial motives, we described an altruistic personality, selecting adjectives from Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken's (1981) scale, and matching these with those used in the egoistic manipulation for equivalence.

Manipulation checks confirmed that there was a main effect of strategy type on participants' perceptions of affect-improving, $F(1,243) = 32.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, and affect-worsening strategies, $F(1,243) = 5.44$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, measured using the IER subscale of the Emotion Regulation of Others and Self 'EROS' scale (Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Stride, 2011), adapted to refer to the leader's use of IER. There was also a significant main effect of motive type on a newly-created 5-item egoistic motivation measure (see appendix), $F(1,247) = 32.50$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$. Mean scores all differed in the expected directions.

Relational outcomes

We captured participants' relational responses using the Leader Member Exchange (LMX-7; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) measure. We asked participants how much they would agree with each of the LMX items in relation to the leader in the scenario after their conversation (e.g., 'I think this team leader would recognise my potential'; $\alpha = .93$). Responses ranged from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 5 '(Strongly agree'). We additionally asked a single item question, 'How much would you like to work with the team leader in the future?', answered using a visual analogue scale from 0 ('Dislike a great deal') to 100 ('Like a great deal').

Discretional performance outcomes

To capture discretional performance, we used Williams and Anderson's (1991) 7-item measure of organisational citizenship behaviour directed towards individuals, adapted so that the items referred to helping the team leader (e.g., 'I would help this team leader if they had a heavy workload'; $\alpha = .97$). Items had a seven point-scale, from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. We also used a behavioural measure of discretional performance. We told participants that after their conversation they received an email from the leader asking for help coming up with names for a new business being set up by their partner and presented an open text box for them to record the names they generated. There was no minimum or maximum amount of time or names that participants could give and there was no incentive tied to task performance. The number of names suggested (range: 0 - 10) was an indicator of discretional performance. The time spent on task (range: 2.82 - 585.69 seconds) was also captured.

RESULTS

Intercorrelations between the main study variables are displayed in Table 2. The results of a 2 (strategy type: improving vs. worsening) by 2 (motive type: prosocial vs. egoistic)

between-subjects MANOVA on the four dependent variables (see Table 3 for means and *SD*s by condition) revealed significant main effects of strategy type on all outcomes, Fs(1,241) > 57.53, ps < .001, η^2s > .19, with the exception of the number of names generated during the discretional performance task, $F(1,241) = 0.06$, $p = .82$, $\eta^2 < .01$. All outcomes were higher in the affect-improving than the worsening condition. There were also significant main effects of motive type on all outcomes, Fs(1,241) > 4.11, ps < .05, η^2s > .02, except for the number of names generated, $F(1,241) = 0.06$, $p = .80$, $\eta^2 < .01$, with outcomes higher in the prosocial than the egoistic condition.

Crucially, there were significant interactions between strategy and motive types in predicting all of the outcomes, Fs(1,241) > 4.30, ps < .05, η^2s > .02 (see Figure 1), apart from the names generated in the discretional performance task, $F(1,241) = 0.43$, $p = .51$, $\eta^2 < .01$.[1] In line with our hypothesis, for the outcomes of LMX, wanting to work with the leader again, and OCB, while there were significant main effects of strategy type (such that outcomes were higher for affect-improving than worsening) in both motives conditions, the effects of strategy type were much stronger in the prosocial motive condition, Fs(1,123) > 49.31 ps < .001, η^2s > .29, than in the egoistic motive condition, Fs(1,122) > 7.27, ps < .05, η^2 > .06.

DISCUSSION

In line with prior research, our study found that the effects of IER depend on the strategies that are used, with strategies to improve emotions leading to more favourable outcomes in terms of relationships and discretional performance than strategies to worsen emotions. However, we depart from previous research in showing that these effects depend on regulators' apparent motives, such that the positive effects of affect-improving versus

[1] Exploratory analyses using time spent helping during the discretional performance task, as an indicator of effort, revealed no significant main effects and no interaction.

affect-worsening are stronger when the regulator is prosocially motivated and weaker when the regulator is egoistically motivated.

Our research therefore contributes a more nuanced understanding of the effects of IER, helping to shed light on some as yet unanswered questions about why attempts to improve others' feelings might sometimes backfire, and why attempts to worsen others' feelings might sometimes receive relatively positive responses. In particular, our study suggests that an important reason why IER has unexpected effects is that the social information communicated by IER may vary according to the apparent motives of regulators. For example, humour might fail because the regulator is perceived to be insincere, due to being driven by egoistic motives, e.g., impression management.

The effects that we observed did not extend to the behavioural performance measure we included in our study. While previous research suggests that IER can influence ratings of citizenship behaviour (Little et al., 2016), our study was the first to examine effects on actual discretional performance during a task. The null results for this outcome suggest that followers are less affected by leaders' IER when it comes to their actual behaviour, perhaps because individual differences in intrinsic task motivation trump any impact that IER might otherwise have.

In practical terms, our study informs leadership training programmes, which often seek to develop use of IER strategies with scant regard for leaders' motives. Our research shows that such an approach is insufficient because the positive effects of strategies like praising followers might be undermined or at least lessened if leaders comes across as egoistic.

Limitations of this research include the use of hypothetical scenarios, which means that further research is needed to determine if the effects we observe translate to spontaneous IER in the workplace. In addition, our manipulation of the leader's motives was indirect (via a description of the leader's character). While the manipulation did alter perceptions of the

leader's motives, we cannot rule out the possibility that a third variable (e.g., liking of the leader) might have driven our results, so future research should consider a more direct way to tap into people's motives. Future studies should also control for intrinsic task motivation when studying behavioural measures of discretional performance.

REFERENCES

Dahling, J. J., Whitaker, B. G., & Levy, P. E. (2009). The development and validation of a new Machiavellianism scale. *Journal of Management*, *35*(2), 219-257. doi.org/10.1177/0149206308318618

Dasborough, M. T., & Ashkanasy, N. M. (2002). Emotion and attribution of intentionality in leader–member relationships. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *13*(5), 615-634. doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(02)00147-9

Dienesch, R. M., & Liden, R. C. (1986). Leader-member exchange model of leadership: A critique and further development. *Academy of Management Review, 11*(3), 618-634. doi.org/10.5465/amr.1986.4306242

Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *6*(2), 219-247. doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5

Humphrey, R. H. (2002). The many faces of emotional leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *13*(5), 493-504. doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(02)00140-6

Little, L. M., Gooty, J., & Williams, M. (2016). The role of leader emotion management in leader–member exchange and follower outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *27*(1), 85-97. doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.08.007

López-Pérez, B., Howells, L., & Gummerum, M. (2017). Cruel to be kind: Factors underlying altruistic efforts to worsen another person's mood. *Psychological Science*, *28*(7), 862-871. doi.org/10.1177/0956797617696312

Niven, K. (2016). Why do people engage in interpersonal emotion regulation at work? *Organizational Psychology Review, 6*(4), 305-323. doi.org/10.1177/2041386615612544

Niven, K. (2017). The four key characteristics of interpersonal emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *17*, 89-93. doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.06.015

Niven, K., Holman, D., & Totterdell, P. (2012). How to win friendship and trust by influencing people: An investigation of interpersonal affect regulation and the quality of relationships. *Human Relations, 65*(6), 777-805. doi.org/10.1177/0018726712439909

Niven, K., Totterdell, P., & Holman, D. (2009). A classification of controlled interpersonal affect regulation strategies. *Emotion*, *9*(4), 498-509. doi.org/10.1037/a0015962.

Niven, K., Totterdell, P., Stride, C. B., & Holman, D. (2011). Emotion Regulation of Others and Self (EROS): The development and validation of a new individual difference measure. *Current Psychology*, *30*(1), 53-73. doi.org/10.1007/s12144-011-9099-9

Rushton, J. P., Chrisjohn, R. D., & Fekken, G. C. (1981). The altruistic personality and the self-report altruism scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *2*(4), 293-302. doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(81)90084-2

Van Kleef, G. A. (2009). How emotions regulate social life: The emotions as social information (EASI) model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 18*(3), 184-188. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01633.x

Williams, L. J., & Anderson, S. E. (1991). Job satisfaction and organizational commitment as predictors of organizational citizenship and in-role behaviors. *Journal of Management*, *17*(3), 601-617. doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700305

Williams, M., & Emich, K. J. (2014). The experience of failed humor: Implications for interpersonal affect regulation. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *29*(4), 651-668. doi.org/10.1007/s10869-014-9370-9

Table 1. Scenarios manipulating leader IER strategies and motives

Manipulation	Text
Affect-improving strategies	During the discussion, you notice that your team leader appears to be making a deliberate effort to improve your mood by praising you and comparing your performance positively to others. You also notice that your team leader is listening to your problems and tells you that they are willing to spend time helping you to solve any problems you have at work.
Affect-worsening strategies	During the discussion, you notice that your team leader appears to be making a deliberate effort to worsen your mood by criticising you and comparing your performance negatively to others. You also notice that your team leader is ignoring your problems and tells you that they are unwilling to spend time helping you to solve any problems you have at work.
Prosocial motives	Your leader is known at work for being trusting of others, for liking to help others, and for rarely bending the rules. Your leader is also very giving.
Egoistic motives	Your leader is known at work for being suspicious of others, for liking to be in control, and for sometimes bending the rules. Your leader is also very ambitious.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables

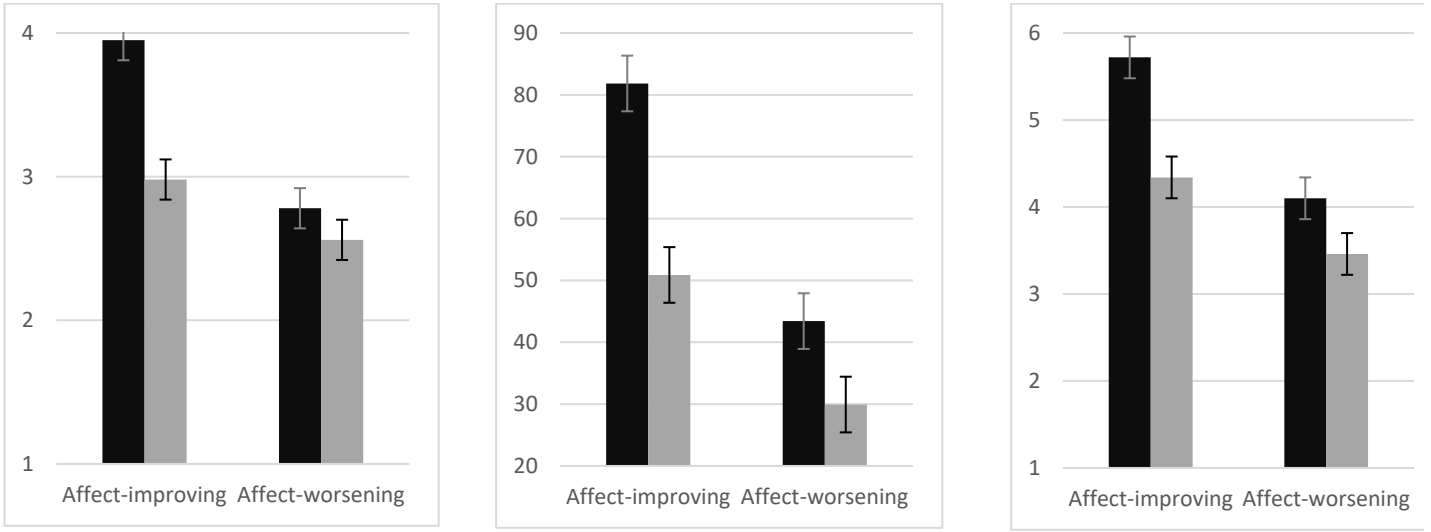
	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. LMX	3.08	0.95	-				
2. Wanting to work with leader again	51.91	31.48	.84**	-			
3. OCB	4.43	1.55	.77**	.79**	-		
4. Time on task	81.21	84.71	-.03	-.01	.01	-	
5. Number of ideas	1.49	1.53	-.02	.06	.13*	.42**	-

Note: $N = 249$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Means for dependent variables across the four conditions

	Affect-improving prosocial ($N = 64$)		Affect-improving egoistic ($N = 64$)		Affect-worsening prosocial ($N = 61$)		Affect-worsening egoistic ($N = 60$)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
LMX	3.95	0.45	2.98	0.79	2.78	0.88	2.56	0.94
Wanting to work with leader again	81.84	18.27	50.88	26.12	43.42	27.05	29.93	27.80
OCB	5.72	0.86	4.34	1.27	4.10	1.62	3.46	1.40
Time on task	75.24	71.39	81.36	84.89	70.14	57.30	98.56	114.83
Number of ideas	1.47	1.25	1.55	1.48	1.59	1.66	1.35	1.73

Figure 1. Interaction effects of motive type (prosocial shown in black bars, egoistic in grey bars) and strategy type



LMX | Wanting to see the leader again | OCB

Note. Error bars show standard errors. Non-overlapping error bars indicate a significant between-condition difference.

APPENDIX

Newly created egoistic motives for IER measure

When [person x] tries to control my emotions, they do it…

1. … to provide support for me (r)

2. … to benefit themselves

3. … to boost my morale (r)

4. … to help achieve their own goals

5. … for my own good (r)