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# THE FOUR KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL EMOTION REGULATION

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## Abstract

Emotion researchers are increasingly interested in processes by which people influence others' feelings. Although one such process, interpersonal emotion regulation, has received particular attention in recent years, there remains confusion about exactly how to define this process. The present article aims to distinguish interpersonal emotion regulation from other, related processes by outlining its four key characteristics. Specifically, interpersonal emotion regulation is presented as a process of (i) regulation, that (ii) has an affective target, (iii) is deliberate, and (iv) has a social target. Considering these characteristics raises questions for future research concerning factors that may influence the process of interpersonal emotion regulation, why interpersonal emotion regulation sometimes fails, and whether interventions can improve people's use of interpersonal emotion regulation.

# THE FOUR KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL EMOTION REGULATION

When you try to make your friends feel enthusiastic about the new restaurant you want to check out, to stop your baby from crying, or to quell the pride of that annoying co-worker who is bragging about his achievements, you are engaging in the process of interpersonal emotion regulation (IER). In recent years, research on this process has burgeoned. Yet there remains confusion about what exactly IER is and how it corresponds to related processes. In this article, I outline the four key characteristics of IER, using these characteristics to distinguish what is unique about IER, to highlight some of the core recent insights in the field, and to pose new questions for researchers to consider.

## Characteristic 1. A form of regulation

The most fundamental characteristic of IER is that it is a regulatory process. In other words, it is about changing or maintaining a state in line with some kind of reference goal [1]. Support for this perspective is provided by research into the brain regions that are recruited during the process of IER. For example, a recent fMRI study reported that performing IER activated brain areas including the inferior frontal gyrus and pre-supplementary motor area, which have been previously implicated in other forms of regulation, such as dieting and thought suppression [2].

Viewing IER primarily as a form of regulation affords the insight that it is a goal-directed process, in which the regulator is driven by some kind of motive. In line with this understanding, recent theoretical and empirical work has devoted attention to identifying the goals that underlie IER. While many have assumed that IER is engaged purely prosocially, with the aim of helping someone else (e.g., as a form of caregiving among spousal couples [3]), research suggests that IER may be motivated by a variety of other goals. For instance, people working in service occupations, such as in retail, are often motivated by the goal of

fulfilling their job role, which requires them to make their customers feel good [4,5]. Another important goal is instrumentality, whereby IER is engaged to benefit one's own performance (e.g., to gain the upper hand in a negotiation; [6]). A recent theory attempted to differentiate the underlying motives that drive IER, identifying eight distinct goals – including those mentioned above – that the process may be engaged in order to fulfil [8].

While the work so far in this area provides insight into why people might engage in IER, it is unclear whether the goals that underlie people's use of IER influence the emotions that people want to elicit or change in others or the strategies that people use to bring about their chosen states. For example, prosocial goals are likely to result in attempts to improve others' feelings, whereas instrumental goals could drive attempts to worsen the way others feel [8]. Goals could also influence regulatory strategy choice, for example, whether people select antecedent-focused strategies to change how others actually feel or response-focused strategies to change only the outward display of emotion in others [9]. Further research taking into account the motives that underlie IER will therefore deepen our understanding of the process.

**Characteristic 2. An affective target state**

The second key feature of IER is that it has an affective target; the state that is being regulated is a feeling state. This distinguishes IER from other processes whereby the state being regulated is cognitive (e.g., impression management) or behavioral (e.g., peer pressure). While IER may be performed in the service of higher-order goals that are non-affective in nature, as discussed above, the means through which these goals are attained is the regulation of affect. The recruitment of emotion generation systems in the brain, such as the amygdala and ventral striatum, during IER support the primacy of affect in the process of IER [10].

Specifying IER as having an affective target a means that engaging in the process is likely to have implications for the feelings of those who are subject to IER, as demonstrated in laboratory [11] and field [12] investigations. Given the many and varied consequences of affect [13], this suggests that IER may in turn influence a host of other outcomes for regulatory targets. Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated that using IER towards others can influence those others' behavior [14], physical health [15], and even the severity of their clinical symptoms [16–18].

A fundamental question arising from this body of research concerns why IER sometimes fails to have the intended consequences on targets' affect. Researchers have identified IER failure as a phenomenon that has important implications for regulators' self-esteem [19], but have yet to explain why failure might occur. Factors such as selection of inappropriate strategies (e.g., due to a misreading of the situation or having a limited repertoire to select from) and unskilled implementation of strategies have been theorized as important [20], but further empirical research will enable greater insight into the success and failure of IER.

**Characteristic 3. A deliberate process**

The third characteristic of IER is that it is deliberate. In this way, IER can be distinguished from a multitude of processes that, on the face of it, appear to be quite similar [21]. For example, we frequently leave those we interact with feeling the same way we do without any idea that we are doing so, as a result of mimicry and facial feedback (i.e., emotional contagion; [22,23]), or our personality (i.e., affective presence; [24–26]). IER is different from these processes because, like other deliberate processes, it is intentional, controlled, resource-intensive, and engaged with conscious awareness [27].

An important implication of viewing IER as a deliberate process is that, like other deliberate acts of regulation, it may be depleting to perform, because it consumes valuable

personal resources [28]. Recent studies on IER concur with this idea. For instance, engaging in IER has been shown to deplete subsequent self-regulation performance in a laboratory context, and to correlate with emotional exhaustion in the field [29]. However, not all forms of IER are thought to be equally depleting; in an experimental study, trying to worsen others' emotions was found to be more depleting compared with trying to improve others' emotions [30]. The crucial factor in explaining this difference appears to be feedback [31]. Attempts to improve others' emotions are likely to elicit a positive affective response, which provides resources that can offset the loss of resource caused by the deliberate regulatory nature of the act, whereas the feedback from worsening others' emotions may exacerbate resource loss.

Within the broader literature, researchers have identified ways to diminish the depletion associated with deliberate regulation processes, for example using implementation intentions or structured practice to automatize regulatory action [32,33]. An interesting avenue for future research will therefore be to explore whether such interventions could also be effective for reducing the personal costs of IER. Such research will be particularly valuable in contexts in which people are required to perform IER as part of their job role, as becoming depleted in such contexts is likely to result in poorer performance and personal well-being [4].

**Characteristic 4. A social target**

The final key characteristic of IER is that it is has a social target. All forms of regulation involve a regulator, who is engaging in the act, and a target state that is being regulated [1]. For IER, the target state is social in that it belongs to someone other than the regulator [10,34,35]. Some researchers have used the term IER more broadly, to also include forms of emotion regulation wherein the target state belongs to the regulator (i.e., intrinsic emotion regulation), but where the regulation occurs within a social context [20,36]). However, I argue that this characteristic of IER is crucial in distinguishing the process, because almost all emotion regulation is socially embedded, occurring during or in

anticipation of interactions with others [37,38]. Indeed, the uniqueness of IER in this regard has been confirmed in fMRI research demonstrating that IER, but not intrinsic emotion regulation (even that performed in social conditions, with another person ostensibly watching), activates brain areas responsible for mentalizing and other facets of social cognition, such as the left anterior temporal pole and medial prefrontal cortex [2].

Recognizing IER as having a social target highlights that IER may have implications for the relationship between the regulator and intended target. Research suggests that IER can facilitate the formation of new relationships in both face-to-face and online social networks [39], and can enhance the quality of existing relationships, most notably building trust, for example between leaders and their followers [14,40,41] and even between staff members and inmates in prisons [42]. Moreover, partners in close relationships may form a shared regulatory system whereby they develop relatively stable patterns of coregulation and codysregulation of each other's emotions [43,44]. For instance, romantic couples often establish patterns of worry-regulation through which they enhance and diminish their partners' anxieties [45].

Although it is clear that engaging in IER is likely to influence the development of relationships, research to date has much less to say about how the relational context influences IER itself. Factors such as the nature, length, and intimacy of the relationship may affect the type of emotion that people want to regulate in others (e.g., a person might want to induce performance-enhancing emotions in partners but performance-diminishing emotions in rivals [6]). Such factors may also influence people's choice of strategies (e.g., a person might use touch as a regulatory strategy in close personal relationships but avoid this behavior at work [46]), as well as the chances of regulatory failure .

**Conclusions**

By explicating the key characteristics of IER, the distinctiveness of the process from other, related processes, becomes clearer. In particular, a range of regulatory processes that share similarities with IER can be distinguished because they lack one or more of the characteristics of being deliberate and having an affective and social target (see Figure 1). Given that some of the characteristics that distinguish IER are probably best conceptualized as continua (e.g., regulatory states are thought to exist on a continuum between deliberate and automatic [27]), an important issue for future research will be to further investigate the links and overlaps between IER and various other processes.

Considering the key characteristics of IER has helped to identify some of the questions that are likely to provide most insight into the process in the future (see Table 1). A general criticism of the emotions literature is that it has often failed to properly recognize the dynamic nature of emotion processes, in that they change over time and in response to social feedback [47,48]. The questions identified here provide an exciting opportunity to shed further light on such dynamics. Taking the example of the first questions concerning IER goals, a person's goals when engaging in IER may change across the course of an interaction (e.g., a retail worker might start off wanting to give care to a customer who is complaining, but this goal might shift to simply fulfilling the job requirements in response to rude customer behavior). In turn, these changing goals may give rise to different IER strategies and consequences for the interaction partners. A promising method that may allow researchers to appreciate the dynamic nature of IER is video-cued recall, wherein interactions are video recorded and then replayed multiple times in an attempt to retrospectively capture interaction partners' goals, feelings, thoughts, and so on [45]. State-space grids, which represent interaction partners' states (e.g., emotions) as they change over time, have also been recently used to study IER in a dynamic manner [49]. Adopting such methods to address the questions

identified here will hopefully result in a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of IER as it unfolds in real-time.

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*Table 1.* Core insights and future questions relating to the four key characteristics of interpersonal emotion regulation

| Characteristic | Core insights | Future questions |
|---|---|---|
| Regulation | A goal-directed process; IER may support a variety of higher-order goals such as compassion, instrumentality, and emotional labor | Do IER goals influence which emotions we want to regulate in others and the strategies we choose to use? |
| Affective target | Implications for intended targets' emotions; downstream consequences for outcomes such as behavior, health, and clinical symptoms | Why does IER sometimes fail to have the intended effect on target emotions? |
| Deliberate | An effortful, resource-intensive process; may result in depletion unless positive feedback is received | Can interventions be used to reduce the depleting effects of IER by making the process less effortful? |
| Social target | Influences the formation and development of relationships; stable patterns of coregulation may emerge over time | Does the relational context influence which emotions we want to regulate in others and the strategies we choose to use? |

*Figure 1.* The four key characteristics of interpersonal emotion regulation. Other forms of regulation may share one or more of the characteristics of interpersonal emotion regulation, but interpersonal emotion regulation uniquely combines all four characteristics.