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Decentring Emotion Regulation

**Decentring Emotion Regulation: From Emotion Regulation to Relational
Emotion**

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Abstract

This article takes a critical approach to emotion regulation suggesting that the concept needs supplementing with a relational position on the generation and restraint of emotion. I chart the relational approach to emotion, challenging the 'two-step' model of emotion regulation. From this, a more interdisciplinary approach to emotion is developed using concepts from social science to show the limits of instrumental, individualistic and cognitivist orientations in the psychology of emotion regulation, centred on appraisal theory. Using a social interactionist approach I develop an ontological position in which social relations form the fundamental contexts in which emotions are generated, toned, and restrained, so that regulation is decentred and seen as just one moment or aspect in the relational patterning of emotion.

Keywords: emotion regulation, relational emotion, social interaction, distributed emotion regulation.

One of the issues with the literature on emotion regulation is the centrality of regulation itself. Why are we so focused on the *regulation* of emotion? The everyday definition of regulation refers to the control of something by means of rules and regulations, the latter set by an authority. In Gross's influential account of emotion regulation, this 'refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions' (Gross, 1998, p. 275), a definition he still adheres to (Gross, 2014, p. 6). But this creates two issues, the first of which emotion regulation theorists rarely refer to explicitly; that is, it implies that emotion is something that *needs* regulating, invoking the old Enlightenment idea that emotion is unruly and potentially dangerous unless it is kept in check by reason. Although many emotion regulation theorists have come to challenge the split between reason and emotion, especially under the influence of neuroscience, which is increasingly calling into question the old idea that there are separate centres in the brain for reason and emotion, this has not led to questions being asked about why regulation is so important in the study of emotion. The implication is that emotions are potentially disruptive and in need of regulation for the sake of health and wellbeing.

This leads to the second issue with the idea of emotion regulation: that is, it creates what Campos, Frankel, and Camras (2004) have referred to as a 'two-factor' or 'two-step' model of emotion regulation, in which the first step involves 'a set of processes related to the generation of emotion, and the second a different set of processes coming after the elicited emotion and involving management or mismanagement of the generated emotion' (p. 377). This is

critiqued because it posits the existence of emotion in some unregulated state followed by attempts to regulate or manage emotion, at which point the nature of the emotion and its expression changes. It has been argued that we must abandon the two-step model in order to understand that emotions only ever appear in some regulated form and that, therefore, there is only one process in acting out emotions and not two (Campos, Frankel, and Camras, 2004; Campos, Walle, Dahl, and Main, 2011; Kappas, 2011). But this raises the question of exactly what it is in emotion regulation that needs regulating?

In this article I take up current challenges to the idea of emotion regulation that suggest a relational approach to the issue. In the first section below I set out Gross's influential account of emotion regulation, which draws on central concepts from psychology, particularly appraisal theory. In the second section I look at the challenges to this and the development of a relational approach to emotion regulation within psychology itself. In the third section I attempt to develop the relational approach by drawing on ideas from within sociology and social psychology to create a more interdisciplinary approach. In the relational approach, emotions are not primarily seen as individual phenomena; instead, emotions are understood as *patterns of relationship* (Bateson, 1973), in that emotional expressions only occur in particular relational patterns, or what Gergen (1994) calls 'emotional scenarios.' In an example given by him, the anger and hostility that emerge in scenarios of domestic violence are generated by repetitive patterns of relationship between couples that escalate into increasing levels of antagonism: these are not emotions that individuals want to feel, nor do they necessarily feel them prior to their relational engagements, but rather they

emerge from the pattern of relationship. Here, I take this approach in a slightly different direction through a social interactionist perspective on emotions. This involves adopting the ontological position that social relations form the fundamental contexts in which ambivalent or conflicted emotions are generated, toned, and restrained, so that regulation is just one moment or aspect of the relational patterning of emotion. This also provides another perspective to current theories of emotion regulation, which are formed around the centrality of *individual* cognitive processes of appraisal, suggesting a more embodied and interactive approach to emotion and cognition.

J. J. Gross and the Psychological Generation and Regulation of Emotion

Gross has emerged as one of the key theorists in the study of emotion regulation, developing models that incorporate different elements of psychology. For example, his *modal model* of emotion aims to identify features that are evident in many different psychological approaches to emotion, including the centrality of appraisal theory. In this model,

Emotions involve person-situation transactions that compel attention, have meaning to an individual in light of currently active goals, and give rise to coordinated yet flexible multisystem responses that modify the ongoing person-situation transaction in crucial ways (Gross, 2014, p. 5).

Thus, in the modal model, the sequence begins with a psychologically relevant situation that can be specified by features of the external or internal

environment, such as standing in front of an audience to give a talk or thinking about that situation prior to it happening. The situation is then attended to in ways that give rise to appraisals of what it means in respect of goals that are relevant to the individual, and the emotional response is generated by these appraisals. So prior to giving a talk the person's goal may be to look smart and intelligent in front of the audience or to get their message across; however, if the situation is appraised as dangerous, in the sense of 'I may mess up and look stupid and inarticulate', the emotional response will be of fear or nerves; but if the situation is appraised in terms of opportunity, as in 'what a great opportunity to get my ideas across', the emotion will be of excitement or positive anticipation that minimizes or replaces nerves. The emotions generated by appraisals involve changes in experiential, behavioural, and neurobiological response systems that also feedback into the situation. Thus, if the person manages to stay calm at the start of their talk that will increase their sense of confidence and control, whereas if the person's fear overwhelms them the appraisal that the situation is going badly may cause them to be even more afraid. Overall, though, the sequence of situation, attention, appraisal, and response (with the response feeding back into the situation and changing it in some way) is central to the modal model of emotion.

However, depending on the goals of the individual, a person may attempt to regulate the processes of emotion generation, impacting on the dynamics of the emotion as it unfolds over time. In his *process model* of emotion regulation, Gross (2014) identifies five types or 'families' of emotion regulation. The first is 'situation selection', which involves selecting or avoiding altogether particular

situations because of the emotions they generate. The second, 'situation modification', involves changing the situation in some way to change its emotional impact. Third, 'attentional deployment' involves no change in the actual situation but instead a change in the mental focus of the individual on aspects of the situation that create a desired emotional response, whilst also diverting attention from other aspects that might create unwanted or negative emotions. Fourth, 'cognitive change' involves a person changing the way they think about a situation by giving it a different meaning. And finally 'response modulation' is where a person tries to modify, hide, or suppress the emotional response, or affect another response entirely. Of the different families of emotion regulation, Gross (2002) has highlighted cognitive change as among the most effective, especially strategies of cognitive reappraisal, because it can be applied early in the process of emotion generation. Reappraisal is a form of cognitive change in which new personal meaning is assigned to a situation that changes experiential, behavioural, and physiological response tendencies without the need for constant self-monitoring and regulation. Thus a potentially emotion-eliciting situation is cognitively re-constructed in less emotional terms or in terms of completely different emotions, as in my earlier example of someone preparing to give a talk: instead of someone thinking about what could go wrong and getting fearful, they can reappraise the situation as a great opportunity and their nerves as excitement. In this way certain negative emotions are 'down-regulated' (fear and nervousness) and more positive emotions are 'up-regulated' (excitement and positive anticipation).

Although Gross agrees with critics like Campos et al. (2004) and Kappas (2011) that it is hard to draw a clear distinction between the generation and regulation of emotion, nevertheless through the modal and process models he maintains a functional distinction between emotion and its regulation. In this functional distinction, emotion arises when a person cognitively evaluates a situation as relevant to a particular goal, whereas emotion regulation occurs when the emotional response itself is subject to an evaluation that leads to the activation of a goal to change it (Gross, 2014). So for example, if my goal is to get to work at a particular time so as not to be late for a meeting, I may find myself getting angry over a slow driver on the road blocking my progress. As I feel the anger rising or maybe getting out of hand I may negatively value that anger and try to change it. This would involve emotion regulation – perhaps by trying to cognitively re-evaluate the situation in seeing the slow driver as unsure of the road and deserving of patience rather than anger. In instances like this there is actually a kind of two-step process in play, where we evaluate our emotional responses and, if we do so negatively, may try to change them into something we feel is more acceptable.

For me, though, the central problem with Gross's approach to both emotion generation and emotion regulation is that the approach is primarily focused on the individual, cognitive relation to a situation, having at its core 'a conception of emotion that prioritizes internal action tendencies' (Gross, 1998, p. 278). This downplays the relational aspect of emotion in which people affect each other in their interactions. It is true that Gross (2014) does account for both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* emotion regulation, the latter occurring when someone else acts to

regulate our emotions – for example, to calm us down or make us smile. However, he notes that in most psychological research, studies of extrinsic emotion regulation are done mainly with infants, whereas work on intrinsic regulation is done mainly with adults. Gross has attempted to account for the social and cultural factors involved in emotion regulation, yet the work he has done with colleagues on this topic is mainly focused on the culture-specific nature of regulation strategies and the social consequence of these, rather than on the cultural generation of emotion (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). Ultimately, both the modal model of emotion and the process model of emotion regulation are based on a lone individual, presumably adult, cognitively appraising a situation in the light of their own goals.

Furthermore, although Gross says that emotions are ‘whole body phenomena’, he nevertheless characterises the process approach to regulation as an ‘information-processing model’ (Gross, 2014, p. 7). Certainly, for Gross, appraisal theory is central to both his modal and process models, a theory that from the beginning in Arnold’s work stressed the way that objects must be cognitively evaluated as ‘affecting me personally as an individual with my particular experience and my particular aims’ (cited in Colombetti, 2014, p. 85). Here, the meaning of emotional experience is given in terms of how objects affect me ‘personally’ as ‘an individual’, with social meanings left unconsidered. After Arnold, appraisal theory became more disembodied and cognitively based, whereby ‘the smart, evaluative aspect of emotion is all in the head, and the rest of the organism has no evaluative function’ (Colombetti, 2014, p. 98). In the final section here, I shall suggest a more integrative, social and embodied approach to

emotion. Before that I turn to the relational approach to emotion regulation being developed by others.

The Relational Approach to Emotion Regulation in Psychology

For Campos et al. (2004) emotion is a relational phenomenon because it is the result of a person–event transaction. This includes the emotional communications that go on between people in interactions, involving the expressive reactions in the face, voice, and bodily gestures, as well as linguistic expressions, all of which convey the impressions that others have of us and that we have about them. The response to these impressions is emotional because it involves the feelings we have about others and the way that others' impressions of us affects our self-feeling (Cooley, 1922/1983; Mead, 1934). The relational approach also 'places the human being into ever larger but concentric circles of social influence, from the dyadic to the cultural and historical' (Campos et al., 2004, p. 379). Furthermore, emotion and emotion regulation are conjoined from the beginning as one process that reflects the attempt by the person to adapt to the problems encountered in transactions with the environment, or with others in the social context.

Although Campos et al. recognise something like the two-step process of 'emotion then emotion regulation' in people's experience this is often an illusion. Rather, what is happening in such experiences is a form of conflict resolution between two emotions in which each emotion aims at a different goal. An example they give is that a person may have a sexual desire for another but holds

this in check for fear of rejection. Thus the emotion and its checking or regulation emerges from the same situation but is constituted by two emotional impulses with a different goal: desire or love that wants to win the affection of another, countered by fear of rejection that aims to protect the self from possible hurt. For me, this is an important development in the understanding of emotion and its regulation, because it introduces the idea of emotional tension, conflict or ambivalence into a relational understanding of emotion. Indeed, it is rare that social situations, and the others we interact with in situations, affect us with simple or single emotions of which we are instantly aware. Our responses are often more subtle, mixed or ambiguous. One could also add the wider cultural dimension here and say that in certain relational contexts we are aware of having emotions we ought not to have: for example, in cultures where same-sex sexual relations are outlawed or denigrated, the desire or love for another person of the same sex may be checked by fear of social reprisals, or be suppressed or tainted by feelings of guilt and shame. In this process, one emotion does not emerge before the other, which then acts to regulate it; rather the two emotions are generated together from within the same situation and there is tension between them: they may also bleed together like watercolours on a palette creating emotions like shameful love or guilty desire.

For Campos, Walle, Dahl, and Main (2011) emotional encounters involve not only a relation between the person experiencing the emotion and the object of that emotion, but also with other persons who have their own agendas, goals, and behaviours. Emotion regulation occurs not only when two emotions are in conflict but also when the goals and strivings of various interrelated individuals,

or groups, clash and the participants then have to negotiate and coordinate their goals, in the process regulating their emotions. Managing emotion then involves relinquishing, modifying, or persevering with one's goals. Although the approach of Campos et al. is important because it recognises that both constitutive and regulatory processes are relational, occurring in significant transactions with the world and with others, at another level the theory of emotion remains solidly individualistic. That is because emotion generation and regulation is taking place in relations between people who all are striving for their own *individual* goals, as are the individuals in appraisal theory.

Equally, Kappas (2011) has argued that emotion and emotion regulation should not be understood as two separate processes and that the auto-regulation of emotion is both an intrapersonal *and* inter-individual, or relational, phenomenon. For him, auto-regulation forms a part of the termination of emotion within the regulatory loops of a system, and this can happen either by intrapersonal processes or by inter-individual ones within a social context. An example of intrapersonal auto-regulation would be the experience of grief and how the emotion comes to exhaust itself over time as an individual comes to terms with loss. An added dimension, though, is the way that the social group intervenes to terminate and help resolve grief, and does so in different ways and according to different time-scales in various cultures. However, a problem here for Kappas is that although the social becomes an element in the feedback loops of the regulatory system, this is not the fundamental or necessary basis of regulation. In his approach, based in systems theory, the fundamental system of auto-regulation is an individual one, and the social system only feeds into this. In

contrast to this I will argue in the next section that social relations are the contexts in which emotions are generated, interpreted, and regulated. In this approach, emotion regulation is understood to be but one element in the relational process in which individuals affect, move, and restrain one another.

The Relational Approach in Sociology and Social Psychology: A Social Interactionist and Embodied Account

In the approach I will develop here, I want to build on the work of both Campos et al. (2004; 2011) and Kappas (2011) by using elements of their relational approach. In particular, I want to develop the idea of emotion being about the relation of the person to an event or situation, however for me individuals are not simply related to some external situation but are embedded in situations that involve relations to others as well as to circumstances and events. This means adopting the relational approach I spoke of earlier, in which emotions are not primarily individual phenomena but are patterns of relationship (Bateson, 1973; Gergen, 1994). Furthermore, how people feel about events will also depend on the cultural meanings that give sense and feeling to them, although these cultures can be localized and diverse. So, for example, at a funeral the emotions we feel (grief, sadness, respect, etc.) depend on exactly how we were related to the deceased, how close we were to them or to their family and friends. The emotions we feel during the funeral will also depend on the local culture and whether the meaning of the funeral is a sombre affair that calls for mourning and grief, or whether this is the celebration of a life; for instance, a wake that involves

a party, during which there also would be laughter and collective merriment. In such situations it is harder to identify the goals at which each individual is aiming, leading them to appraisals of the situation that determine what they feel: instead, individuals are bodily immersed in a situation that involves relational interconnections through which they are affected, moved, and restrained in various ways. This can also involve ambivalence, as in the case of the funeral of someone towards whom we had mixed feelings: here, we may stay silent about our more negative emotions out of respect to the deceased's family and closer friends.

Thus I also support the idea of Campos et al. (2004) that what feels like emotion regulation – the control of one emotion by another or by the appraisal of that emotion – may in many cases be the restraint we feel when two emotions are in conflict with one another or when we are conscious about the way our expressions and actions might affect another person. If I want to comfort a friend who is deeply distressed I may restrain my expressions of sympathy in case this upsets them even more, and instead adopt a posture of being quietly supportive. Here, the interactive and communicative relationship between us determines the way we affect and restrain one another: if my friend becomes less distressed, my emotional tone may become more assertively positive to support the change in mood. What is important, then, in this relational position is not so much the appraisal of the situation by a lone individual in terms of their own goals, but the interaction of two or more people in which their emotions are generated, restrained and toned by the relations between them; ones that will involve emotional responses that may be ambivalent or contradictory. The desire to

comfort my distressed friend may also be tempered by feelings of disgust at hints of self-pity or fear at the extent of their distress.

However, an issue raised by this relational stance is the place of goals in the understanding of emotion. The theories of emotion regulation we have considered so far can be related to what Joas (1996) has identified as the utilitarian or instrumental model of action, in which action is conceived of *a priori* as individual and oriented towards clear goals. Emotion regulation theory is also related to a second model of action that Joas calls 'normative,' in which individuals strive to fit or adapt their actions to a social framework of values or rules. The power of emotion regulation theories comes from the fact that these explanations make sense to us, because from time to time we all act and feel in instrumental and normative ways. However, this is not the only way we act. As I pointed out in the example of the funeral above, not all of our feelings emerge from goal directed or normatively oriented actions. Instead, they emerge from deeper existential and relational connections to others and to aspects of our world. This would fit into Joas's third model of action, derived from the pragmatist philosophy of thinkers like John Dewey and G. H. Mead, in which actions emerge from the web of communicative interactions individuals are engaged in. In this understanding, the basis of activity is embodied and habitual, but creativity occurs when problems are encountered in interactions and the participants must discursively reconstruct their actions through meaningful communication. Although Joas refers to this as creative action, I have argued that we can characterize it as aesthetic action, not in the sense of aesthetics as art theory but in terms of how humans make and experience meaning in embodied

interaction, and how emotion is generated as part of this (Burkitt, 2014). I will use this approach here to develop the relational understanding of emotions.

Sociology and Social Psychology of Emotion

There is a large body of literature on emotions in the social sciences, of which Turner and Stets (2005) have provided a thorough overview, including both 'macro-structural' and 'micro-structural' approaches, while Barbalet (1998) has provided his own macro-sociological account. Kemper (2011) has tried to form a bridge between the macro-structures of society and the micro-interactions of everyday life in the study of emotions by focusing on the status-power dimensions of interrelations. However, this has focused his work on six basic emotions (anger, sadness, fear, joy, shame, and guilt) and limited the understanding of emotions in power relations solely to the reaction at gaining or losing power and status (Burkitt, 2005). In contrast, Hochschild (1983) is one of the most prominent exemplars in sociology of a normative approach to the management of emotion, showing how this is achieved according to the 'feeling rules' of various situations. Although she also adopts an interactionist approach, this is informed by the work of Goffman (1961) in which social actors reproduce familiar encounters and situations through the norms and rules that constitute social order. The idea of feelings being managed according to the 'feeling rules' or 'display rules' (Ekman, 1972) of local cultures is one that has been taken up by the emotion regulation literature, although the idea falls into the 'two-step' problem already criticized here, because it suggests that first an emotion arises

which then needs managing to bring it into line with cultural rules and expectations. For Hochschild (1979) the self is conceptualised as an 'emotion manager' that acts to shape emotion into something that is acceptable according to the rules of the situation. This is done through 'emotion work', involving 'deep acting', whereby the emotion-managing self produces the required emotion, either by evocation, 'in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling which is initially absent' but needs to be evoked, or by suppression 'in which the cognitive focus is on an undesired feeling which is initially present' and has to be hidden or expunged (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561).

Following on from this, in social psychology the normative approach and the concept of feeling rules remain central to theories of emotion regulation. For example, Mesquita, De Leersnyder, and Albert (2014) show how the feeling rules of a culture designate the most desirable and valued emotional states and, as such, are endpoints of emotion regulation. Thus, emotions are regulated 'in ways that improve their match with the prevalent cultural models of self and relating' (Mesquita, De Leersnyder, and Albert, 2014, p. 287). This approach is interesting from my point of view for two reasons; first, because it claims that emotions are relationship engagements and that emotion regulation refers to the processes that fashion emotions to be the most adaptive within relationships, according to cultural models. Second, they want to move beyond the psychological focus on *individual emotion regulation* to what they call *social emotion regulation* in which the social and cultural environment is the agent of regulation. In this way they take Gross's process model of emotion regulation and put it into a social context, showing how cultural models are central to situation selection, the focus of

attention, appraisal and reappraisal of situations, and behaviour regulation. So for example, cross-cultural research has shown that cultures tend to promote and support situations that generate culturally favoured emotions – such as shame and conformity in Japan, or anger and independence in the US – and avoid situations arising that would elicit less favoured or condemned emotions (Mesquita et al., 2014).

Although this approach has similarities to the model I am developing here, there are some differences with it. The functional model they use tends to focus on the mechanisms that ‘align an individual’s emotional experience to the pertinent cultural model’ (Mesquita et al., 2014, p. 297), but again we lose the importance of emotional ambivalence and conflict in which individuals may struggle to align their emotions to the required cultural models or may resist doing so. It also assumes that there is just one appropriate cultural model that people have to deal with, and that there is no clash or contradiction between different norms in situations. The relational approach to emotion also disappears somewhat in the functional approach, one that would help to better explain emotional ambivalence and conflict within cultural rules.

The Relational and Interactive Generation and Restraint of Emotion

Thus, in my view, we need to shift the focus away from regulation and instead see the generation and restraint of emotion as part of a relational and interactive process in which interrelated individuals affect and restrain one another within situations that have cultural meanings. It is not, then, primarily at the point of

regulation that emotions are culturally modulated; it is also at the point of generation where emotional experience emerges from embodied relations and interactions within culture. The exact emotions generated by these mutual affects depend on the *relation* between individuals within particular contexts of interaction (Burkitt, 2014). Emotion, then, is always 'to or from or about something objective...[it is] implicated in a situation' (Dewey, 1929/1958, p. 67). Furthermore, for Dewey, we do not just have a cognitive relation to the situation in which emotions are generated by evaluation, we are embodied in the situation and our bodily responses contain the evaluation itself, or at least its beginnings. When we step into the road, our fear of the car we did not see but is now upon us is not, in that instant, a cognitive appraisal of an abstract situation: it is fear of the oncoming car about to hit us. Thus valuing a situation is not so much a psychological act of perception or cognition, but of the embodied response, action, or habit in the situation, which contains the appraisal itself (Dewey, 1894/1971). As Parkinson (2007) has pointed out, emotion can emerge from a person's *orientation* to a situation and from direct adjustments to relational dynamics going on within it – the appearance of a gunman in a bank would be directly perceived as scary. Thus, 'emotions may start out not as sequential responses to information, but as ongoing adjustments attuned to unfolding transactions within the practical and social world' (Parkinson, 2007, p. 24).

This view chimes precisely with the relational and interactive approach that can be drawn from thinkers like Dewey above, and from Mead (1934) and Cooley (1922/1983). Here, emotion is generated from within emotional communications, where I respond to the attitudes that others take towards me

and, in turn, my response also affects others. These responses are not naturalistic but come from our socialization within a culture, which provides the background of social meaning through which we interpret the signs of emotion in another's body – in their looks, gestures, body posture, tone of voice, etc. The attitudes communicated by others affect my own view of myself, what Cooley called the 'my-feeling', so that if others respond to something I have done in a disapproving way this impacts my feelings about myself – am I really such a bad person? This can contradict with the view and the feelings others have of me, or that I have developed about myself through my social interactions in the past, so that we can form ambivalent feelings about our selves and our actions. Indeed, for these interactionists, consciousness is an internal conversation or dialogue between different voices, or between different standpoints on our self or situation, which also involves what Mead called a 'dialogue of impulses': that is, a range of different feelings, emotions or motives in a situation, and it is the role of consciousness to debate and decide upon these. However, these inner conversations are not purely individual because they are linked to the wider social dialogue – the communication of attitudes and evaluations – that is reflected and refracted within them. Evaluation, appraisal, and reappraisal are therefore not only related to individual goals and beliefs, but also to collective cultural values around which relations and interactions between individuals and groups are centred. As individuals and groups collectively debate and re-evaluate these beliefs from various conflicting positions they become open to change, so that reappraisal is not solely an individual, cognitive process, but one that happens interactively across space and time.

In this view, consciousness is not understood along the lines of an information-processing model, one centred on the cognition of an individual or their own personal meanings. Indeed, situations are rarely straightforward and are often contradictory or ambiguous. Because they are not transparent, information cannot be extracted from situations solely through the direction of attention or by appraisals that cognitively assess events through the goals, needs and beliefs of an *individual*. Instead, situations can be ambiguous and thinking is *interpretative* in terms of the social meaning of the context or of its conflicting meanings. Nor is the self understood as an emotion manager in this interactive approach: rather, consciousness is an inner dialogue between different, ambivalent impulses, feelings, and emotions, and also a dialogue between different standpoints involving the attitude that others have taken, or might take, towards us. How we act depends on the outcome of these dialogues, with the self being composed of varied, often contradictory feelings and viewpoints. Here, feeling rules are not the central order of concern: the normative standards of a culture are part of the wider set of cultural meanings through which we interpret situations and the behaviour and attitudes of others within them. It is from these standpoints that we reflect on situations and upon our own feelings and impulses, choosing the actions we feel are appropriate in context or that we feel will affect others in the desired way.

This means that emotion regulation itself can be reframed in a relational, interactive, and bodily perspective as opposed to a purely cognitive one (Szanto & Krueger, 2015). For example, Varga and Krueger (2013) have talked about *distributed emotion regulation*, which is a process that occurs in the interaction

between people. They have studied this in relation to depressive states and to child development, in the latter case where *both emotion generation and regulation* takes place in the relation between child and caregiver. In this close relationship the infant does not simply learn from the caregiver but rather experiences the world *through* them, assimilating their bodily stance and the vitality of the bodily interactions between them, through which the infant comes to relate to the world from their own position. So young infants rely heavily on the intervention of caregivers to regulate their emotions for them and caregivers do so through physical interactions – such as directing a child’s attention, touching and holding them, using mutual gestures and vocalisations. These interactions direct an infant’s attention away from distressing things and towards more positive experiences, help to construct their activities and to stimulate them, but also to comfort and sooth. In doing this, caregivers provide a *distributed relational stimulation and regulation* of the infant’s arousal levels and background emotions. Furthermore, different patterns of interaction create different relationship-specific ‘affective contours’ or vitality affects (Stern, 1985) that become manifest as particular emotions. This creates a sense of ‘feeling connectedness’ to the world that, if lacking, can lead to a range of problems in adulthood, such as depression and other negative background emotions.

Thus, Varga and Krueger show how emotion regulation itself depends on the way we take the standpoint of others into our own self and experience the world through them, even though at this stage it happens through vitality affects rather than by taking the point of view of another through dialogue. It could be claimed that this is another example of extrinsic emotion regulation, focused on infants

rather than the intrinsic regulation in adults. However, for Varga and Krueger these early relations with others – and through them, with the world – can endure into adulthood as embodied emotional dispositions, such as depression. Furthermore, in their approach, relationships are the ontological starting point because people do not simply act to suppress or change another's emotional responses: instead, the interaction between people affects their very being, forming the self and its emotional dispositions in the world and its ways of being with others. Emotions and feelings, then, are generated and regulated in situations where we are engaged in embodied interactions and, as such, they are about our being in the world and being in relation to others.

Conclusion

I have been arguing here that we need to decentre the concept of emotion regulation in order to shift attention away from a primary focus on regulation or management, instead understanding the restraint of emotion as occurring in the relations between people that also involve the ways individuals affect one another and so generate emotion. From a psychological perspective, Gross's theory of emotion regulation has advanced our understanding of both generation and regulation processes, specifically in circumstances where individuals act instrumentally, experiencing emotion in pursuit of individual goals or personal meanings, and attempting to manage emotions normatively in accordance with cultural regulations. It is not so much, then, that this approach is wrong; indeed it explains those experiences we all have from time to time when we struggle with

difficult or unwanted emotions that interfere with our everyday functioning. However, the approach is limited by its very instrumental and individualistic ontology and by the centrality it gives to a two-step emotion regulation process.

In contrast, Campos et al. (2004) suggest a relational approach to emotion and its regulation that places humans into the larger but concentric circles of social relations, from small group situations to the cultural and historical: however, they too are limited by their adherence to an individualistic, goal-oriented understanding of emotion. By expanding on individualistic and disembodied cognitive approaches through an interdisciplinary perspective drawing on the social sciences, we can begin to see how the process of emotion regulation can be set firmly in a social and cultural context as social emotion regulation or as distributed emotion regulation. However, by adopting a relational and social interactionist approach, we can also understand how the embodied emotions experienced in different situations can be contradictory and ambivalent, and that there are not just two steps in emotion regulation but at times just one; when two contradictory feelings or emotions are present and we need to resolve this tension. And such a resolution is rarely achieved alone: we regularly talk our emotional dilemmas through with those closest to us, meaning that the reappraisal of emotion is not always a lone, cognitive task. Indeed, consciousness itself is a dialogical phenomenon, so that even if we attempt to resolve dilemmas ourselves, we do so by debating from various standpoints and from the viewpoints of others with whom we are related. In this approach, consciousness is not about processing information but about the interpretation of meaning as we move through the situations that compose our lives, all the while being

emotionally affected, moved, and restrained by the actions of others, just as they are emotionally affected and restrained by us. Emotion generation and regulation occurs in patterns of relations involving embodied dialogical selves in a social and cultural world.

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