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REPLY

Taking one's lumps while doing the splits: A big tent perspective on emotion generation and emotion regulation

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Whenever one categorises, one either has to “lump” or to “split”. In psychology, lumping consists of emphasising similarities among two or more mental processes or behaviours over differences, leading to a decision to treat two or more potentially separable processes or behaviours as “the same” for the purpose at hand. Splitting consists of emphasising differences over similarities, leading to a decision to treat two or more processes or behaviours as “different”.

The perspective we articulated in our target article (Gross, Sheppes, & Urry, 2011 this issue) is a “big tent” perspective. We emphasised that in some contexts, and for some purposes, it may be appropriate to “split” rather than to “lump”. However, we also emphasised that this distinction—like any other distinction—can at times be harmful as well as helpful.

In the following sections, we consider each of the two commentaries on our target article. We then offer several possible ways to think about the relationship between “emotion generation” and “emotion regulation”, and renew our argument

that it is time to move beyond debates about *whether* this distinction is useful to a more specific consideration of *when* and *in what ways* this distinction is useful.

MESQUITA AND FRIJDA: EMOTION GENERATION AND EMOTION REGULATION ARE RARELY SEPARABLE

The main premise of the thoughtful commentary provided by Mesquita and Frijda (2011 this issue) is that emotion regulation is rarely distinct from emotion generation. Indeed, one of the few places these processes are separable is in a laboratory, where individuals are asked to explicitly modify their emotional responses. This is because the laboratory's artificial environment creates emotional situations that involve one central emotional theme or concern. However, in real-life situations, different concerns compete with each other for dominance, and regulation is seen as the dominance of one concern over another. Therefore, it is

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the rule rather than the exception that emotion regulation is part and parcel of emotion generation.

While we agree that diverse emotional concerns are often co-active in everyday life, we come to a different conclusion regarding the necessity, prevalence, and importance of the distinction between emotion generation and emotion regulation. Let us begin where Mesquita and Frijda's position and ours coincide, in the laboratory. Here we agree that when one emotional concern has been activated (e.g., by presenting a sad film clip) and one emotion-regulation goal has been provided (e.g., to decrease one's sadness), it makes sense to distinguish emotion generation and emotion regulation. At issue is whether (1) situations in which one concern predominates are restricted to the laboratory, and (2) emotion regulation is only separable from emotion generation when one concern among many predominates.

From our perspective, although many emotional concerns may be co-activated by the complex social situations in which we live, life experience can gradually make certain concerns more dominant than others, so that a certain emotion-triggering event eventually gives rise to one dominant concern. Repeated experience with a situation that gives rise to particular emotional concerns may then also lead a person to explicitly regulate this concern. Consider a patient who suffers from combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Each loud noise dominantly activates the concern of dying on the battlefield and hence induces terror. However, with the help of his therapist, the person is able to reduce his overblown fear response to loud noises by learning to remind himself that the traumatic event has passed and he is now safe. Thus, as this example illustrates, situations in which one concern predominates are not restricted to the laboratory.

Let's now consider contexts in which multiple "hot" emotional concerns are co-active and compete for dominance. We agree with Mesquita and Frijda that a given emotional event can activate multiple "hot" emotional concerns and that one of these concerns may dominate others in its influence on behaviour. However, in our view this competition only constitutes emotion regulation if

one or more "cold" regulatory goals is responsible for adjudicating the competition. For example, when the boss of a firm makes a mean remark to his employee at a meeting, multiple emotional concerns may be activated in the employee (e.g., concerns that prompt shame and anger). At the same time, a fairly cold instrumental goal to reduce anger so as to avoid being fired might also be activated in the employee. If this regulatory goal prompts the shame concern to "win out" over the anger concern, then we would say that emotion regulation has taken place (and if anger subsides and shame dominates, then regulation was successful).

KAPPAS: EMOTION GENERATION AND EMOTION REGULATION ARE ONE

The main premise of the thought-provoking commentary provided by Kappas (2011 this issue) is that the processes that we have argued reflect "emotion regulation" actually reflect emotion generation. Kappas' argument hinges on the notion that emotions are auto-regulatory, which means that emotion-triggering situations prompt behaviours that terminate the situation and thus, the emotional response. For this reason, it is not necessary to invoke "emotion regulation".

Kappas illustrates the auto-regulatory nature of emotion-generative processes by considering the situation of encountering a spider. According to Kappas, stepping on the spider—much like startling and feeling uncomfortable—is a behaviour that emerges as one of many emotion-related responses. Moreover, it is a behaviour that terminates the situation and thus the emotion (i.e., it removes the concern that generated startling, discomfort, and the urge to step on the spider in the first place). From this perspective, it is unnecessary to conceptualise "emotion regulation" as a set of processes that are separable from the umbrella concept "emotion generation". Apart from being unnecessary, it is also not useful since it implies that emotions would never end without the application of separable regulatory processes.

We agree that emotion-related responses can indeed terminate the situation that triggered the emotion in the first place. We further grant that behaviours evinced in a particular emotional episode (like stepping on the spider in Kappas' example) may diminish or amplify the emotion without being considered emotion-regulatory behaviours. From our perspective, what makes a particular behaviour emotion-regulatory critically depends on the goal that motivated the behaviour in the first place. Killing a spider with the goal of preventing violation of the body envelope may be best explained as reflective of emotion-generative processes. Killing a spider with the goal of reducing one's discomfort, on the other hand, may be best explained as reflective of emotion-regulatory processes. The value of this distinction is more clearly evident if we consider a variant of Kappas' example in which a person's regulatory goal to cope with fear results in overriding the emotional impulse to kill the spider. We would argue that the putative auto-regulatory nature of emotion cannot explain this behaviour as emotion-generative. Instead, it is useful to invoke emotion regulation.

ONWARD AND UPWARD: A BIG TENT PERSPECTIVE

One point of agreement with our commentators stands out clearly, and that is our shared enthusiasm for the exciting theoretical and empirical work that is being done today on emotion-generation/emotion-regulation processes. The key point of difference—as we have described in the sections above—is whether (and when) it is useful to distinguish between emotion-generation and emotion-regulation processes. In this section, we consider three cross-cutting themes that together suggest a road map for future thinking and research in this area.

What does it mean for two constructs to be separable?

Threaded throughout our target article and the two commentaries is the fundamental question of

what it means for two psychological constructs to be separable. To address this question, an analogy to another common distinction may be instructive. This is the distinction between cognition and emotion. As with the distinction between emotion generation and emotion regulation, many feel compelled by the force of the distinction between (cold) cognition and (hot) emotion. This lay intuition has played an important role in psychology since its earliest days, and continues to play an important role to this day. At the same time, it is difficult if not impossible to draw a bright line that will unequivocally divide the two sets of processes (Pessoa, 2008). What implications should this have for our use of this age-old distinction?

From our perspective, the distinction between cognition and emotion remains a valuable one, but neither construct refers to an immutable natural kind. Instead, each refers to an ill-bounded class of phenomena, and although consensus may be found about the value of distinguishing particular cases, there seems to be no principled way to firmly segment these domains. Despite this fact, we and others continue to make this distinction in part because it has allowed us to learn more than was possible by considering either construct alone. What is important here, however, is that we think (as the commentators have argued) that there are purposes for which it does not make sense to draw either the distinction between cognition and emotion (e.g., if one is interested in ascertaining how neurons work) or between emotion and emotion regulation (e.g., if there is no clear indication that an emotion-regulation goal has been activated and no evidence of change in the emotion response trajectory).

This consideration highlights the importance of clearly articulating one's analytic goals when deciding to distinguish (or not distinguish) between two constructs. For some purposes—and in some contexts—a particular distinction will be helpful. For other purposes—and in other contexts—a distinction may not be helpful. To argue about whether a distinction is or isn't useful

without specifying purposes and contexts misses this crucial point.

What is the place of laboratory studies?

One concern commonly expressed by critics of the distinction between emotion generation and emotion regulation is that this distinction is more relevant to laboratory studies than it is to everyday life. It is true that laboratory studies create artificial contexts, which afford much greater certainty than correlational studies about the role that emotion-regulation processes play in determining outcomes. This is because regulatory processes can be directly manipulated in laboratory experiments, which permits causal inferences to be drawn.

From our perspective, the strengths of laboratory studies of emotion (the ability to exert a high degree of control over independent variables and make causal inferences) should not blind us to their weaknesses. The experimental context is by definition a highly simplified context, and this simplification means that it is always an open question how findings from this context relate to the highly complex social environments in which we typically operate. This means that laboratory experiments are only one of several methods that must be applied to understand the full complexity of emotion-generative and emotion-regulation processes. Moving forward, it will be important to mix experimental and correlational approaches, to

export laboratory paradigms into real-world situations, and to be careful not to overstate the generalisability of laboratory findings.

Do we need to agree about whether to distinguish emotion and emotion regulation?

A continuum of positions regarding the distinction between emotion and emotion regulation may be described. At one end of the continuum, theorists are shown as preferring non-overlapping constructs of emotion generation and emotion regulation (Figure 1, Panel A). At the next step in the continuum, theorists are shown as preferring partially overlapping constructs, meaning that sometimes emotion-generative and emotion-regulatory processes are separable, and sometimes they are not (Figure 1, Panel B). This is our preferred position. Further down the continuum, theorists are shown as preferring to think of emotion-generative and emotion-regulatory processes as virtually (but not quite entirely) overlapping (Figure 1, Panel C). We take this to be the position offered by Mesquita and Frijda in their commentary. Finally, at the right end of the continuum, the construct of emotion is by itself seen as fully explanatory; there is no need to invoke a second emotion regulation construct (Figure 1, Panel D). We take this to be the position offered by Kappas in his commentary.

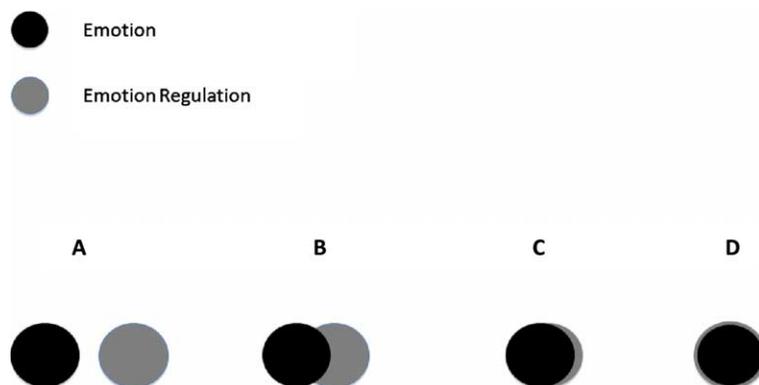


Figure 1. A continuum of positions on the distinction between emotion generation and emotion regulation.

Our view is that many different positions may be useful when considering complex processes. Mesquita and Frijda would urge a conception of emotion that includes emotion regulation as competition among emotional concerns. They make some room for a separate conception of emotion regulation but only in a very limited circumstance. Kappas would also urge a conception of emotion that includes emotion regulation, but he argues that phenomena that are often described as “emotion regulation” may be more parsimoniously described in terms of simple emotion processes. He thus leaves little room for a separate conception of emotion regulation. From our point of view, no one position on the distinction between emotion generation and emotion regulation—including ours—is “right” in any absolute sense. Each requires different conceptual and methodological tools, and we think it is a mistake to insist (from any one vantage point) that others’ tools are “wrong” just because they don’t fit one’s own viewpoint or research agenda (which necessarily

foregrounds certain issues and not others). In that sense, we think it is unnecessary for all to agree whether to distinguish between emotion generation and emotion regulation. Instead, we believe it is important to articulate one’s own viewpoint and goals, draw inferences accordingly, and allow others to do the same.

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