

# Regulating Emotions: Culture, Social Necessity, and Biological Inheritance

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What seems so compelling about the regulation of emotions to researchers in many different disciplines is that within this theme, questions concerning the alleged antipodes nature and nurture or biology and culture are conflating in most obvious ways. We suspect that this is precisely the reason why emotion regulation has recently attracted such an exceptional attention in a scientific environment that is characterized by a growing interest in bridging disciplinary boundaries. Without a doubt, the topic of emotion regulation has experienced a boom at the beginning of the 21st century, with many important contributions coming from academic disciplines as diverse as psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, psychotherapy, and sociology—not to mention the more popular writings and counseling literature.

Research on emotions in the past 20 years has increasingly portrayed emotions as highly functional phenomena of crucial evolutionary significance and biological grounding—in individual as well as in social and cultural terms. Clearly, this has not always been the case. From the Greek philosophers to the Scottish moralists, emotions have often been considered as disturbing and irritating occurrences in human life, in particular in domains requiring calm analysis, deep thinking, or polite manners. However, in other areas emotions have never ceased to be “that certain something,” more or less legitimately serving as most compulsive means and ends of human action.

Although emotions are ubiquitous in human affairs, it seems not too bold to claim that what has separated “man” from “animal” in many societies and cultures till today is the potential and the ability to keep one’s emotions *under control*. That is, to hide them from and adapt them to these affairs, not to forget oneself when faced with indignity, to keep calm

even after 20 minutes on the telephone service line, or to be courteous at another boring dinner party. This social necessity to keep emotions under control seems to arise, for one thing, from emotions' compelling nature to direct peoples' actions, either as an urging feeling to act ("action tendency") or as a strong motive in itself (e.g., getting relief from one's anger) (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Frijda, 1986; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003).

If this is true, then there must be something about emotions and emotional behavior that is potentially dangerous or at least undesirable from a social or societal point of view. This, in turn, would mean that emotions' evolutionary founded "wisdom of the ages" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 820) is not as timeless as it seems, and, indeed, emotions and emotion-based actions are notoriously suspected to undermine the "wisdom" of social order and cultural integrity and to promote deviant behavior—they are thus supposed to be kept at bay in many different contexts and for many different reasons (see Gross, Richards, & John, 2006). The same can be said from an individual point of view: because emotions frequently occur outside of conscious awareness (Barrett, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007; Winkielman & Berridge, 2004) and are—at least in part—equally involuntarily expressed to others (Kappas, 1997; Russell, Bachorowski, & Fernandez Dols, 2003) they may well foil consciously pursued individual goals, for example in a poker game, in concentrating on a difficult math exam, or when trying to conceal a lie (Ekman, 2004).

Changing environmental demands change the contingencies of our emotions. Not all emotional reactions are always adaptive and beneficial, and this seems even more true for modern societies. Emotions are, so to speak, evolutionary relics that may well go over the top in a number of situations. They seem to "happen to us" and to have us in their grip; they let us do things that we often enough come to regret at later times. But emotions are not reflexes—they are more like an alarm bell that prompts for action or further investigation of the cause of the alarm. Thus, they are also subject to potential change and revision: the ability to regulate emotions allows people to keep them in line with prevailing environmental conditions and socio-cultural demands.

This might lead to the impression that the social and individual functions ascribed to emotions are somewhat restricted to primeval environments and ancestral challenges, that they are a mere biological inheritance, rigid and increasingly useless in human affairs. But nothing could be more misleading. Research on emotions has continuously emphasized that they are indispensable components of many intraindividual functions, for example, cognitive, physiological, phenomenological, or behavioral (Levenson, 1999). They are equally important in social encounters by contributing to

the formation or disruption of social relationships, the emergence of social bonds, and the coordination of social action and interaction (Frank, 1988; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Moreover, recent research indicates that they are also involved in most complex societal functions, such as the enforcement and maintenance of social norms and social order (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Thoits, 2004). Thus, the question seems to be legitimate whether “emotions [are] *ever* to be regulated?” (Gross, 1999, p. 552).

How is it, then, that emotions are still considered somewhat awkward at times—despite these well known individual and social functions? If all emotions and emotion eliciting conditions were the same in all cultures and societies, then there probably would be not much fuzz about emotion regulation in cultural context. But research on emotions has not only revealed different functions of emotions with respect to their biological foundations, but at the same time continuously highlighted their variability, flexibility, and adaptability—in particular with respect to these functions (e.g., decoupling stimulus from response and accentuating behavioral options rather than directly causing behavior, see Scherer, 1994, and Baumeister et al., 2007) but also in view of their elicitation and experience (see Mesquita & Markus, 2004, and Turner & Stets, 2006, for an overview). What is considered disgusting in one culture may be highly appreciated in another, what is considered embarrassing at work may be highly welcome in family life, and what evokes shame in one culture may elicit pride in another one.

The debate on whether emotions are evolutionary hard-wired reactions to environmental challenges or outcomes of social and cultural practices is almost as old as research on emotions. Whatever the ultimate answer to this question might be, the fact seems to be that there is considerable cultural and intrasocietal variability in the eliciting conditions of emotions, their experience, and expression, in particular in view of self-conscious or “higher social” emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride (Mesquita & Karasawa, 2004; Tangney & Fischer, 1995).

One path to answering the above stated question might therefore be found in the assumption that social and cultural representations of emotions have evolved in many different ways, whereas their underlying biological architecture—the affect system—has largely remained unchanged and thus universal, and that emotion regulation serves to adapt and fine-tune this system to the respective socio-cultural contexts (cf. Ochsner & Gross, 2007; Mesquita & Albert, 2007). In line with this reasoning is a definition of emotion regulation as “the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275).

And this is—roughly speaking—the path this volume is following. It seems almost clear to us that in view of more or less disparately evolved socio-cultural systems also the causes, occasions, techniques, and goals of emotion regulation differ between and even within the distinct social and cultural contexts. However, this is only one side of the coin. The other side is that intercultural differences in emotions in turn beg the question of how these variations are brought about and implemented in a specific socio-cultural environment. A number of articles in the present volume suggest that emotion regulation *as such* is a crucial factor in bringing about intercultural and intrasocietal differences in emotions. In adopting the idea that culture and society are fundamentally shaping and thereby “regulating” emotions, one-factor models of emotion regulation are providing answers to these questions in conceptualizing emotion regulation as a process that is not limited to an actual emotion episode, but rather extends to ontogenetic development and socio-cultural evolution (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004). According to this view, emotions are already regulated *prior* to their actual elicitation in that they (and their social representations) are simply more salient, more despised, more sought after or more avoided in one culture than in another (cf. Mesquita & Leu, in press).

There is a further intriguing aspect to the one-factor view: If we had to constantly and consciously monitor our emotions in view of their appropriateness and social adequacy, we would soon run out of cognitive resources in everyday life. Therefore, not only do different cultures and social environments set the stage for the regulation of emotion and provide corresponding goals, but they also actively and purposefully engage in regulative developmental processes through social institutions, for example, socialization practices, the corroboration of social and individual goals, belief systems, habits, and rituals, knowledge, or specific norms, rules, and codes of conduct. They entail what in this volume is dubbed “automatic emotion regulation.”

It was precisely this twofold relationship between an evolutionary and biologically rooted affect system on the one hand, and highly differentiated social and cultural concepts and representations of emotions on the other hand that had motivated us as editors to marshal this interdisciplinary overview on the regulation of emotion. The incentive for this volume goes back to a workshop at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at Bielefeld University in 2004 that was hosted by the center’s research group on “Emotions as Bio-Cultural Processes.” The year long work of this research group had mainly concentrated on identifying linkages between biological and socio-cultural determinants of emotions (cf. Markowitsch, Röttger-Rössler, & the ZiF-Research-Group, in press).

It soon turned out that the many facets of emotion regulation are a major factor in finding this linkage—from the point of view of almost all the disciplines involved in the group: psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychiatry.

However, the vivid discussions at the workshop have made it clear that the distinct disciplines have considerable difficulties in mutually communicating their concepts and approaches—if only on a semantic level in many cases. For example, when psychologists talk about “emotion regulation” (e.g., Gross & Thompson, 2007), sociologists are used to discuss “emotion work” and “emotion management” (Hochschild, 1979; cf. Grandey, 2000); and when anthropologists refer to an emotional “ethos,” sociologists advance “social norms” and psychologists bring forward “representations” (cf. Mesquita & Leu, in press).

Thus, the aim of this volume ultimately is to bring together the different disciplines involved in research on emotion regulation and to harbor an interdisciplinary dialogue that sharpens each discipline’s understanding and awareness of the respective paradigms. This dialogue is facilitated by the main thread of the book, namely the question of how social and cultural aspects of emotion regulation interact with regulatory processes on the biological and psychological level. The contributors thereby deal with the evolutionary assumptions implied by the volume’s title and at the same time highlight the role of social and cultural requirements in the adaptive regulation of emotion. Put in a nutshell: the articles in this collection revolve around the basic question whether emotion “is ever not regulated” (Gross, 1999, p. 565).

The volume is divided into four parts. The contributions in part one discuss conceptual and foundational issues of a bio-cultural perspective on emotions. The articles in part two illustrate the role of culture and social interaction in the development of emotion regulation. The chapters in part three assess the consequences of potential conflicts between social and individual expectations, emotions, and emotion regulation from a psychopathological perspective. Finally, the contributions in part four highlight the socio-cultural environment as affecting and being affected by emotion regulation.

The first part of the volume is introduced by Arvid Kappas who vividly argues that emotion and emotion-control are part and parcel of the same processes. According to Kappas, any scientifically viable theory of emotion also has to be a theory of emotion-control, being able to predict for a particular person in a particular event and context how he/she will react, e.g., with regard to expressive behavior. Kappas criticizes current theories for failing in this respect by merely invoking concepts such as display rules, feeling rules, unknown social intentions, or idiosyncratic appraisals

as straw men. He goes on to show that as long as the display rules, feeling rules, etc. are not included in the boundaries of the emotion theories, it will not be possible to make any predictions that could be tested in the real world.

Iris Mauss, Silvia Bunge, and James Gross in their chapter are concerned with the question of how socio-cultural contexts affect individuals' emotion regulation. Their analysis rests upon the fact that most prior research on emotion regulation has focused on deliberate rather than automatic forms of emotion regulation. From a socio-cultural point of view, they argue, this is particularly unfortunate, since they suspect socio-cultural factors to have a pervasive effect on emotion regulation through automatic processes. Mauss, Bunge, and Gross start their argument by distinguishing two types of emotion regulation: response-focused (which takes place after an emotion is initiated) and antecedent-focused (which takes place before an emotion is fully initiated) emotion regulation. They subsequently review how socio-cultural contexts engender response- and antecedent-focused automatic emotion regulation and how these two types of regulation in turn affect individuals' emotional responding and well-being. They suggest that automatic emotion regulation is shaped by cultural contexts providing the individual with implicit norms and automatized practices that can be either situationally or emotionally cued. Importantly, they find that antecedent-focused automatic regulation seems to be relatively adaptive while response-focused automatic regulation seems to be relatively maladaptive.

Claire Hofer and Nancy Eisenberg in their contribution review research relevant to understanding the biological, that is, genetic and molecular, bases of emotion regulation and the relations of emotion-related regulation to socialization and developmental outcomes in several cultures. In doing so, they give a concise overview of the biological makeup of effortful control and self-regulation on the one hand, and the different environmental influences on emotion regulation, in particular socialization conditions, on the other hand. In addition, Hofer and Eisenberg focus primarily, albeit not solely, on individual differences in measures of dispositional emotion-related self-regulation. Although they conclude in calling for more efforts to be made to better measure emotion regulation and related constructs, Hofer and Eisenberg emphasize that, although there are differences among socialization beliefs and practices across cultures, there is also some degree of universality in the processes involved in the influence of socialization on emotion-related regulation.

Leading in the second part of this volume that shifts attention from individual to interactional and developmental processes in emotion regulation, Gisela Trommsdorff and Fred Rothbaum seek to understand cul-

tural differences in emotional regulation by examining differences in the development of the self. They assume that emotion regulation is related to a person's self-construal and to his/her goals and in their comprehensive review integrate evidence on culture-specific construals of the self as well as on cultural differences in goal orientation. The processes and outcomes of emotion regulation, they argue, should strongly depend upon these different conceptions of self and goals. To corroborate their argument, they consider extensive evidence of cultural differences in child-rearing conditions and socialization practices. Trommsdorff and Rothbaum clearly show that common assumptions and findings from Western research on emotion regulation that are often treated as universal are not quite so and that a thorough understanding of emotion regulation can only rest on a culture-informed theory.

Phillip Shaver, Mario Mikulincer, and David S. Chun in their chapter marshal an attachment theoretical approach to emotion regulation. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) provides an understanding of the developmental origins of individual differences in emotion regulation, in particular within close relationships. Originally based on studies concerned with human infants' emotional bonding with their mothers, attachment theory has more recently moved towards analyzing emotional attachments in adults and also to individual differences in emotion regulation associated with different patterns of attachment styles. Shaver, Mikulincer, and Chun outline attachment theory, review psychological and neuropsychological research on attachment-related individual differences in emotion regulation, and show how security-related regulation processes foster mental health and prosocial behavior. The theoretical model they develop suggests that attachment security and the ability to regulate emotion is closely associated with a variety of prosocial feelings and caregiving behaviors: Secure attachments make it easier to focus and meet others' social needs, whereas insecure attachments interfere with empathic perceptions of others' needs and thus decrease the likelihood of effective prosocial behavior.

Maria von Salisch in her contribution gives a detailed overview of the developmental influences on the regulation of emotion, the socialization of emotion regulation, and the development of interindividual differences. Her analysis is based on a process model of emotion generation and develops around four main themes that comprise the better part of developmental research on emotion regulation: the fundamental changes in emotional development in childhood and adolescence; the multidimensional development of emotion regulation; the shift from interpersonal to intrapersonal emotion regulation; and the differential development of emotion regulation. Her analysis of the available evidence culminates in

an original transactional model of emotional development that puts the four themes of emotion regulation under one overarching and integrative perspective.

The articles in part three of this volume focus on potential problems and difficulties arising from the social expectations and individual needs related to emotion regulation. They highlight probable consequences of mismatches between socio-cultural expectations and individual emotions and outline clinical and psychopathological implications. In doing so, Pamela Cole, Tracy Dennis, Sarah Martin, and Sarah Hall take on the developmental theme of the previous part and investigate the interplay of emotion regulation and the early development of psychological competence and psychopathology. Because they assume emotional processes to be inherently regulatory, Cole, Dennis, Martin, and Hall first discuss conceptual challenges of defining and measuring emotion and distinguishing emotion regulation from emotion in regard to both typical and atypical development in early childhood. They describe four specific dimensions of emotion regulation that are pertinent to psychopathological risk and can be inferred from behavioral observations. Referring to a clinical case example of a young child with a major depressive disorder, they present testable predictions about how children at risk for depression can be distinguished from typically developing children on the basis of behavioral observations. Concluding, they provide a set of concepts and suggest methods of measurement that can be used to test hypotheses about individual differences in emotion regulation.

Pierre Philippot, Aurore Neumann, and Nathalie Vrielynck investigate a dimension of emotional information processing that they deem relevant for emotion regulation in general and for psychopathology in particular: the specificity versus generality at which emotional information is processed. Specificity in this model refers to the activation of detailed and precise information about specific emotional experiences well circumscribed in episodes lasting less than a day. Generality in turn refers to the activation of generic information about emotion, for example, features that tend to be repeatedly experienced during a given emotion or abstract information about more extended periods of time. Philippot, Neumann, and Vrielynck start with a review of research showing that several emotional disorders are characterized by an overgenerality bias in emotional information processing. Subsequently, they question the validity of naïve theories sustaining this bias by referring to a cognitive model of emotion regulation that is based on multilevel theories of emotion. They then examine the regulatory consequences of processing emotional information at a specific or overgeneral level and finally outline implications for psychopathology and clinical intervention.



Martin Peper and Roland Vauth in their chapter then review the difficulties in defining and assessing socio-emotional competencies that comprise diverse functional domains related to emotion regulation, for example, awareness of one's own emotions, perception of emotions in others, and coping and management skills. Peper and Vauth first inspect the basic constructs and functional components of emotions and discuss the structure and typical definitions of socio-emotional abilities. They give a concise overview of the assessment of emotion regulation by means of psychometric tests and critically review the methodological difficulties involved. Taking schizophrenia as an exemplary clinical application, Peper and Vauth describe typical deficits of emotional processing in these patients and present a rehabilitation program that is based on an original neuropsychological working model of emotion regulation and focuses on the training of high-level socio-emotional skills.

Leslie Greenberg and Marie Vandekerckhove even more shift attention from emotional self-regulation to the regulation of emotions by another person by investigating in detail how emotion regulation and its disorders can be approached from a psychotherapeutic perspective. In combining affective neuroscience and one-factor models of emotion regulation they explore the role of the client–therapist relationship in the treatment of emotion related disorders. Based on the emotion-focused therapy approach originally developed by Greenberg (2002), they assign a dual role to emotion regulation in therapeutic relationships: First, the relationship is therapeutic in and of itself by serving an emotion regulation function which is internalized over time. Second, the relationship functions as a means to an end. The client–therapist relationship, they argue, should offer an optimal environment for facilitating specific modes of emotional processing because emotions are much more likely to be approached, tolerated, and accepted in the context of a safe relationship. Greenberg and Vandekerckhove articulate a number of principles of emotion assessment and emotional change in therapy by referring to different aspects of emotion generation and regulation. They conclude by presenting evidence and techniques on how maladaptive emotions can be transformed into more adaptive emotions in a therapeutic setting.

The articles in part four of the present volume highlight the socio-cultural context as the primary object of inquiry, both as an immediate and “one-factor” cause for emotion regulation, and as an object that is equally affected by regulated emotions. Unni Wikan in her illuminating essay describes cases of honor killings in northern Europe in order to illustrate the consequences of emotions that are regulated in ways that differ from those prevailing in most Western cultures. By giving a detailed description of a prominent case of honor killing in Denmark, Wikan gives an insight in

how the mechanisms underlying these acts are tied to the regulation of emotion. She draws on her long-term empirical research on honor and shame in the Middle East and thereby sheds light on what honor “is” and how it needs to be understood to combat rising violence, in particular against women. Wikan in her chapter explores the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms involved and illustrates how honor is at once a matter of pride and oppression.

Poul Poder makes explicit how a specific social environment—in this case a particular organization—shapes the interpretation of feelings and thus their regulation. Taking anger as an example, Poder illustrates how certain types of emotional experiences are silenced rather than welcomed in a specific environment. He presents evidence from a case study on processes of organizational restructuring and shows how employees and executives handle anger in quite different ways. Poder in particular illustrates how anger is not acknowledged in the relationship between management and employees. The article explains how anger can be viewed as integral to morality and that this approach can be considered an alternative to the predominant research on the regulation of anger. Poder outlines how emotion regulation can be understood as a phenomenon facilitated by specific “politics of expression.” According to this view, the regulation of anger is linked to issues of culture and social structure, and is thus not simply a question of particularly ill-tempered personalities.

In a similar vein, Charlotte Bloch discusses the issue of how moods are regulated by emotional cultures. In her contribution she presents evidence on how “flow” and “stress” experiences as specific mood states are interpreted and handled in different contexts of everyday life in modern Western societies. Bloch explicates the way in which emotional cultures play an active, but often overlooked role in people’s everyday interpretations and evaluations of pleasant and unpleasant moods; with the term “emotional cultures”, she refers to different spheres of everyday life that are found in many modern Western societies. In her study, she investigates different strategies of handling flow and stress in work-life, family-life, and leisure-time. Bloch concludes that emotional cultures act as interpretive filters which not only shape and mediate, but also actively disturb or suppress specific moods.

We are confident that we have been able to assemble a volume that on the one hand reflects the lively debates and the extraordinary atmosphere at the workshop out of which many contributions originated and informs the different disciplines about neighboring paradigms, approaches, and findings in research on emotion regulation. On the other hand, we believe that we have managed to solicit additional contributions that fit this interdisciplinary exchange and further contribute to an understanding of

emotion regulation across disciplinary boundaries. In sum, we hope that this volume is an important contribution to the field of emotion regulation research and will stimulate further theorizing and empirical research across many disciplines.

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