



Emotions and the big picture: The effects of construal level on emotional preferences

Anna Schwartz^{a,*}, Tal Eyal^b, Maya Tamir^a

^a The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

^b Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotion regulation
Self-regulation
Motivation
Construal level

ABSTRACT

Emotions can offer instrumental benefits, but people do not always take advantage of them. In this paper, we identify one factor that might propel people to seek emotions that have instrumental value – namely, the level at which a situation is construed. According to construal level theory, construing a situation in high-level terms increases preferences reflecting self-control (i.e., preferences for delayed over immediate outcomes). Therefore, we hypothesized that activating a high-level construal would motivate people to experience emotions that are perceived as instrumental for achieving their goals in the long-run, even if they may be aversive in the short-run. In three studies, inducing a high (vs. low) level mindset increased participants' preferences for useful, albeit unpleasant, emotions. Participants in a high (vs. low) level mindset expressed a stronger preference for anger when they were asked to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which anger was presented as more useful for goal pursuit (Studies 1–2) and when they played an economic game in which anger was potentially useful (Study 3). We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Handling editor: Ursula Hess

Emotions can help us to achieve our goals. In fact, both pleasant and unpleasant emotions can be useful. For instance, while love helps to build and strengthen social bonds and recruit social support (Fredrickson, 1998), anger can help us get a better deal when bargaining (Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006). According to the instrumental account of emotion regulation (e.g., Tamir, 2009a), people may be motivated to experience emotions in order to gain their instrumental benefits, even when these emotions are unpleasant to experience. In such cases, people need to pay a hedonic price in order to achieve their goal, and they are willing to do so when these emotions are expected to yield future benefits that they consider more valuable than the short-term benefit of experiencing pleasant emotions (Tamir & Bigman, 2014). Instrumental emotion regulation has been linked to positive outcomes, such as higher emotional intelligence (Ford & Tamir, 2012), greater well-being (Tamir & Ford, 2012a), and better psychological health (Kim, Ford, Mauss, & Tamir, 2014; Tamir & Ford, 2012a). However, people differ in the extent to which they want to experience useful emotions, especially when they are unpleasant to experience. In the current investigation, we propose that such differences may derive, in part, from different modes of thinking. In particular, we hypothesized that the extent to which people are motivated to experience instrumental emotions may depend on the level at which they construe

the situation.

According to construal level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003), people can construe situations in either high or low-level terms, which in turn leads them to make decisions that reflect a preference to either long or short-term benefits, respectively. We suggest that construing a situation at a higher-level may motivate people to experience emotions that may promote long-term benefits, even if they come at an immediate hedonic price. We tested whether construal level might influence emotion regulation, by shaping what people want to feel.

1. Regulating emotions in the service of goals

When people regulate their emotions, they employ strategies that change current emotions into desired emotions (see Gross, 2015). According to the instrumental approach to emotion regulation (Tamir, 2009a, 2016), people are motivated to experience emotions to attain hedonic or instrumental benefits. People may desire positive emotions for either hedonic benefits, instrumental benefits, or both. When long-term benefits outweigh short-term hedonic costs, people might be willing to experience useful emotions, even if they are unpleasant, when they believe that experiencing these emotions might lead to desired outcomes (e.g., Tamir & Ford, 2009; Tamir & Ford, 2012b). For example, participants who needed to behave aggressively wanted to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: anna.schwartz@mail.huji.ac.il (A. Schwartz).

increase their anger, and increasing their anger, in turn, resulted in better performance and more effective goal pursuit (Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008).

Instrumental emotion regulation is largely adaptive. Engaging in this form of regulation may help shape behavior and cognition in a manner that promotes goal pursuit (e.g., Tamir et al., 2008; Tamir & Ford, 2009). By promoting more efficient goal pursuit, instrumental emotion regulation may promote greater psychological well-being. Indeed, people who seek instrumental emotions seem to have better mental health (Kim et al., 2014), have better social relationships, and experience greater well-being (Tamir & Ford, 2012a). Yet, people do not often seek to experience negative emotions that are instrumental.

Whereas some people flexibly shift their emotional preferences according to instrumental demands, others do not (e.g., Ford & Tamir, 2012; Kim et al., 2014; Tamir & Ford, 2012b). For instance, Kim et al. (2014) found in a daily diary study that people with less depressive symptoms wanted to feel happier the more that they needed to collaborate with others, presumably because happiness can promote collaborations with others. In contrast, people with more depressive symptoms did not vary in their preferences for happiness. It is important, therefore, to understand what leads people to consider the instrumental nature of emotions as they determine what they want to feel.

To date, research on instrumental emotion regulation has focused mainly on objective situational demands (i.e., what type of behavior is required to achieve the best outcome). Such research has shown that the more a particular goal is temporarily salient, the more likely people are to seek out emotions that are instrumental for attaining that goal (e.g., Tamir et al., 2008). However, could it be that the likelihood of considering the instrumental nature of emotions might depend on people's mindset rather than objective situational demands? In this investigation, we propose that the way people construe the situation influences the extent to which instrumental considerations influence their emotional preferences.

2. Emotion regulation and construal levels

According to CLT, the same event or object can be represented at multiple levels of abstractness (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Whereas a high-level construal refers to the representation of stimuli in an abstract and coherent manner, a low-level construal refers to the representation of stimuli in a concrete, detailed, and context-based manner. Therefore, a high-level construal captures the superordinate, central features of an object or event, while a low-level construal captures subordinate, incidental features (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For example, consider the action of riding a bike. When considering *why* one should ride a bike (e.g., to get from one point to another), we address the more general and abstract aspects of the action (i.e., construe the action in high-level terms). However, when considering *how* one should ride a bike (e.g., by moving one's feet on the pedals), we address the more specific and concrete aspects of the action (i.e., construe the action in low-level terms).

The level at which people construe a situation influences self-regulation. In particular, self-control requires high levels of construal (Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; Fujita & Han, 2009; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). This is because self-regulation involves the pursuit of a higher-order goal and overcoming immediate costs or temptations. Construing a situation at a higher level, therefore, can result in more successful self-control. For example, Fujita et al. (2006) found that participants who were primed to construe actions at a high (vs. low) level displayed greater physical endurance (on a handgrip task) and were less likely to prefer immediate over delayed outcomes. High-level construal may even increase the likelihood of using prospective self-control strategies, such as self-imposed punishments (Fujita & Roberts, 2010). It seems that high-level construals may also alter implicit attitudes toward temptations, making them less positive (Fujita & Han,

2009). In sum, leading people to adopt higher levels of construal may enhance their appreciation for the broader, goal-relevant implications of their choices, thus potentially facilitating greater self-control. In contrast, leading people to adopt lower levels of construal may direct people's attention to the salient, secondary, incidental features of their choices, which might lead them to succumb to temptation (Fujita & Carnevale, 2012).

Given that emotion regulation involves self-regulation, construal level should also influence emotion regulation. Indeed, if a higher level of construal leads people to pay more attention to long-term outcomes and devalue immediate costs, people should be more likely to consider the instrumental aspects of emotions when adopting a higher level of construal. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the degree to which an emotion is instrumental should impact the motivation to experience it under high, but not low, levels of construal. This should be the case even when the emotion is unpleasant to experience, and, therefore, offers no hedonic benefits. People who adopt a high-level construal should be more motivated to experience an instrumental than a non-instrumental emotion. In contrast, the instrumentality of emotions should matter less for people who adopt a low-level construal, because low-level construal highlights immediate benefits rather than long-term goals.

3. The current investigation

Although we assume that construal levels can influence preferences for any emotion, building on existing work on instrumental emotion regulation, we focused our empirical studies on preferences for anger. Similar to other studies on instrumental emotion regulation (for a review, see Tamir, 2016), participants imagined (Studies 1–2) or participated (Study 3) in situations involving a higher-order goal in which anger was more (or less) useful, and we assessed how people wanted to feel in that context. At the beginning of the studies, we manipulated construal-level mindset, using a validated procedure (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). As previously mentioned, we chose to manipulate instrumentality of anger in all three studies. Because anger can increase confidence and aggression, it can be instrumental in contexts that require social confrontation (e.g., Tamir et al., 2008; Tamir & Ford, 2012b). In addition, because anger is an unpleasant emotion, people are likely to be motivated to experience it for instrumental, but not hedonic, reasons. We predicted that people who were led to adopt a high level of construal (but not those who adopted a low level of construal) would be more motivated to experience anger when it is instrumental than when it is not.

4. Study 1

In Study 1, we manipulated the instrumentality of anger, by using a hypothetical scenario that presents participants either with a goal that anger is likely to promote (i.e., confrontation) or with a goal that anger is unlikely to promote (i.e., collaboration). We adopted the manipulation used in Tamir and Ford (2012a, 2012b), where participants play the role of tenants, who need to speak with their landlord about a broken refrigerator. Participants who were randomly assigned to the high instrumentality condition were given information implying that they may need to confront their landlord. Participants who were randomly assigned to the low instrumentality condition were given information implying that they may need to cooperate with their landlord.

We predicted that participants in the high-level construal condition would be more motivated to experience anger when it is expected to be useful (i.e., when they need to confront) than when it is not. We did not expect the instrumentality of anger to influence participants in the low-level construal condition, since instrumental motives should be less salient to them. To establish the validity and specificity of our effects, in

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7323945>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7323945>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)