I know you so I will regulate you:

Closeness but not target's emotion type affects all stages of extrinsic emotion regulation

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Abstract

The Extended Process Model of Emotion Regulation outlines the processes people use to influence the timing and type of emotions they have. The current study applies this model to extrinsic regulation (regulating others' emotions). In a 2x2 between-subject design, we examine how the target person's emotion (anger/anxiety), and target/regulator closeness (close/distant) interact to predict the regulator's intention to regulate, regulation process choice, evaluation of regulation success (regulation self-efficacy), and empathy toward the target. Participants ($N = 266$) were randomly allocated to one of four conditions to read three vignettes where a close/distant target expressed anger/anxiety. Compared to distant targets, close targets elicited significantly greater intention to regulate, social sharing (but not humor, reappraisal, or distancing), self-efficacy of implementation and empathy. There was no support for emotion type or emotion-by-closeness hypotheses. We conclude that closeness but not emotion type affects emotion regulation at all three stages of the Extended Process Model of Emotion Regulation. Future research could include the effect of closeness on additional processes (such as direct situation modification, or giving space).

Emotion regulation describes the processes people use to control their emotions (Gross, 2015). People regulate their own emotions (intrinsic regulation) and others' emotions (extrinsic regulation; Zaki & Williams, 2013). However, most emotion regulation research examines intrinsic regulation (Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2020). The research gap for extrinsic regulation includes how characteristics of the target person affect the regulation process. The current study experimentally manipulates two target characteristics using vignettes (closeness to regulator and type of emotion expressed). We test whether these two characteristics affect people's intention to make a regulation attempt, how much they use four extrinsic regulation processes (distraction, humor, reappraisal, and social sharing), their self-efficacy evaluation of their planned regulation tactics, and their empathy towards the target person. Our research question and main analyses (2x2 ANOVAs) were pre-registered at

<http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=77f59x>.

Extrinsic Regulation

We use the Extended Process Model as our theoretical framework (Gross, 2015). In this model, each emotion regulation attempt occurs when a person: identifies the need to regulate (*identification stage*); selects regulation processes to use (*selection stage*); and implements regulation tactics in the specific context (*implementation stage*). Each stage involves perception, valuation, and action. We also consider empathy towards the target, as empathy is a conceptually relevant pre-cursor to making a regulation attempt.

Identification. Identifying a need to regulate a target person's emotions involves inferring the target's emotional state (perception), attaching a value to that state (valuation), and forming a regulation goal (action; Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2020). We operationalize identification as goal formation strength—participants *intention to regulate* the target's emotions in this situation.

Selection. Selecting a process involves perceiving the range of available processes (perception), evaluating which have the greatest effort/payoff ratio (valuation), and selecting

which processes to use (action). Both Niven et al. (2009) and MacCann et al. (2021) distinguish between extrinsic regulation processes that engage with the target's current emotion (high-engagement processes) versus divert attention away from the emotion (diversion processes). High-engagement processes include *reappraisal* (changing the target's thoughts about their situation to reduce its emotional impact) and *social sharing* (listening to the target express their feelings in socially shared language). Diversion-focused processes include *humor* (using humor to up-regulate the target's positive emotions) and *distraction* (focusing the target's attention away from whatever is triggering their emotions). We operationalize the selection stage as the extent to which participants would use each of four regulation processes (distraction, humor, social sharing, and reappraisal).

Implementation. The regulator must think through how they will: operationalize their selected processes into behavioural tactics (perception); evaluate their abilities, limitations, and the plausible outcomes of their tactics (valuation); and then enact them (action). The regulator requires confidence to implement their approach—a belief their regulation will be effective and appreciated (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). Individuals with greater regulation self-efficacy are more likely to implement their regulation tactics (Gross, 2015). We operationalize the implementation stage as a participant's rated *self-efficacy* of their behavioural tactics (implementation-valuation).

Empathy. Empathy involves cognitive and affective identification with another person—*knowing* what they're feeling (cognitive empathy) and *feeling* what they're feeling (affective empathy; Davis, 1983). Empathy has clear conceptual links to perceiving the need to regulate, which involves detecting the others' emotion and valuing/caring about changing it (Zaki, 2020).

Target Characteristics and Extrinsic Regulation

Emotion type. Emotion type may influence emotion regulation (Gross, 2015). People report experiencing and regulating anger and anxiety more than any other emotions (Gross et

al., 2006), with poor regulation of these emotions linked to poorer physical and mental health (Suinn, 2001). Others' fear expressions elicit approach behaviours, as fear communicates vulnerability which may trigger care-giving (Marsh et al., 2005a, 2005b). In contrast, anger expressions elicit avoidance behaviours, as anger communicates threat of verbal or physical attack (Marsh et al., 2005a, 2005b). People hesitate when dealing with others' anger (López-Pérez & Pacella, 2019), and avoiding angry people may represent an evolved survival tactic (Pritsch et al., 2017). Target anger may therefore reduce regulator engagement, eliciting less high-engagement and more diversion-focused regulation. For example, Niven et al. (2015) suggests that reappraisal may irritate the target by challenging their perspective. Regulators may avoid reappraisal to avoid further angering a target. Because anger is unpredictable and intense (Kuppens, 2008), it may be more difficult to implement effective tactics, leading to lower regulation self-efficacy for anger than anxiety. Anxious targets may elicit greater empathy than angry targets because anxiety triggers approach and caregiving, whereas anger elicits avoidance (Marsh et al., 2005a, 2005b).

Closeness. For close targets, regulators have greater knowledge and context to draw on to identify a target's emotions. People are more likely to notice (identification-perception) and care (identification-valuation) about the feelings of close others (Zaki, 2020) leading to a higher intention to regulate (identification-action). Regulators may select more cognitively and emotionally effortful processes (high-engagement rather than diversion-focused) if they have greater motivation to assess the target's needs, as in the interdependent close relationships (Cavallo et al., 2016). Regulators are likely to have successfully regulated close targets before and would therefore have greater self-efficacy regulating those targets again (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). Target closeness may elicit empathy (Zaki & Williams, 2013; Zaki, 2020). Motivated empathy may be stronger for socially-close targets, as people seek empathy for affiliation motives (to strengthen social bonds), which is most relevant for close targets (Zaki, 2014). Close targets may induce greater empathy as the regulator has greater emotional

investment in the relationship. Greater social proximity to individuals (e.g., close friends) elicits greater commitment to their wellbeing (Mencl & May, 2009).

Closeness and emotion-type. For a lesser-known target, the threat of anger is magnified by uncertainty (reduced predictability). We therefore expect larger effects of emotion type in distant than close targets.

Hypotheses

H1: Emotion effect. Compared to the 'angry-target' condition, participants in the 'anxious-target' condition will have greater intention to regulate, use less diversion-focused processes (humor, distraction) but more high-engagement processes (reappraisal, social sharing), have greater regulation self-efficacy and greater empathy.

H2: Closeness effect. Compared to the 'distant-target' condition, participants in the 'close-target' condition will have greater intention to regulate, use less diversion-focused regulation processes but more high-engagement processes, have greater regulation self-efficacy, and greater empathy.

H3: Closeness-by-emotion effect. Compared to the 'close-target' condition, participants in the 'distant-target' condition will show larger differences in how they react to an angry versus anxious target for all dependent variables.

Method

Study materials and data are available as supplementary material at <https://osf.io/9cgmf>.

Participants

There were 266 participants (202 female, 63 male, 1 nonbinary), aged 18 to 81 years ($M=24.39$, $SD=11.45$), participating for course credit ($n=198$) or recruited through social media ($n=68$). An additional 96 participants were excluded based on pre-registered screening criteria. Most exclusions ($n = 67$, 70%) occurred when participants clicked on the social

media link but did not complete the survey (typical for an online study with no incentives).

Procedure

After consenting and completing demographic questions, participants were randomized to close-target/anxious, distant-target/anxious, close-target/angry, or distant-target/angry conditions ($n=65, 65, 70$, and 66 respectively). The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee approved this research project (Approval no: 2020/296).

Materials

Participants read three vignettes representing a project deadline, work interview and the COVID-19 context, where vignettes represented the randomly-assigned closeness/emotion condition. E.g., “[*Your closest friend*][*A person you don't know very well*] mentions they are feeling [*angry*][*anxious*] about all the changes and possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic” (see electronic supplementary materials for other vignettes). For each vignette, participants completed the following questions. Total scores were averaged across the three vignettes.

Manipulation checks (target anger, anxiety, closeness). Ratings of how much the target felt *anxious*, *worried*, and *scared* assessed target anxiety. Ratings of how much the target felt *annoyed*, *irritated*, *angry*, and *frustrated* assessed target anger. Closeness was assessed by asking “*How close would you feel to this person?*”. Items were rated from 1 (‘not at all’) to 6 (‘extremely’).

Intention to regulate was assessed by three items (e.g., “*I would take action to make them feel better*”) rated on a 6-point scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

Empathy towards the target was assessed with the item “*I feel empathy towards them*”, plus four Empathic Concern items (Davis, 1983), rated from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 6 (‘strongly agree’).

Extrinsic regulation processes were assessed with four four-item scales of the Regulation of Others’ Emotions Scale (ROES; MacCann et al., 2021): distraction (“*I divert*

their attention to something else”), humor (“*I do something amusing*”), reappraisal (“*I discuss different ways of interpreting the situation*”) and social sharing (“*I listen to them talk about their emotions*”). Items were rated from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 6 (‘strongly agree’) following the instruction “I would do the following things TO MAKE THIS PERSON FEEL BETTER”. In prior validation studies, internal consistency ranged from .75 to .92, scales predicted lower relationship conflict and higher relationship satisfaction, and showed convergent validity with respect to other extrinsic regulation scales. A manipulation check question was embedded here.

Regulation self-efficacy. We asked “*Now, in your own words, what would you do to change how they are feeling?*”. Participants then rated the likelihood that “*I would carry out this response*”, “*I would be able to do it well*”, “*My response would make them feel better*” and “*My response would make them feel worse*” [Reverse-keyed] from 1 (‘extremely likely’) to 6 (‘extremely unlikely’).

Power analysis

G-Power software calculations showed that a sample size of 259 was required to detect a small-to-moderate effect ($f = 0.175$, $\eta^2 = 0.030$) in a 2x2 ANOVA with 80% power. We use Cohen’s (1988) heuristics for small, moderate, and large (.01, .06, and .14 for η^2 , 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 for Cohen’s d).

Results

Descriptive statistics by condition are shown in Table 1 and internal consistency reliability in Table 2. Reliability was acceptable for all variables.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics by Condition, and 2x2 ANOVA results testing emotion, closeness, and closeness-by emotion effects on emotion regulation*

	Anger/ Close (<i>n</i> = 70) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Anger/ Distant (<i>n</i> = 66) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Anxiety/ Close (<i>n</i> = 65) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Anxiety/ Distant (<i>n</i> = 65) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Anger (<i>n</i> = 136) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Anxiety (<i>n</i> = 130) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Close (<i>n</i> = 135) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Distant (<i>n</i> = 131) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Emotion <i>F</i>	η_p^2	Closeness <i>F</i>	η_p^2	Emotion by closeness <i>F</i>	η_p^2
Intention to reg.	4.81 (0.66)	4.51 (0.89)	5.02 (0.70)	4.61 (0.79)	4.66 (0.79)	4.81 (0.77)	4.91 (0.69)	4.56 (0.84)	2.73	.10	14.10**	.05	0.31	.00
Distraction	3.86 (1.00)	4.01 (1.01)	4.05 (1.02)	3.94 (0.92)	3.93 (1.00)	3.99 (0.97)	3.95 (1.01)	3.97 (0.96)	0.26	.00	0.03	.00	1.10	.00
Humor	3.82 (1.15)	3.31 (1.10)	3.82 (1.15)	3.42 (1.11)	3.35 (1.07)	3.62 (1.14)	3.59 (1.11)	3.37 (1.11)	4.09*	.02	2.90	.01	1.58	.01
Reappraisal	4.64 (0.56)	4.59 (0.82)	4.67 (0.79)	4.56 (0.81)	4.62 (0.73)	4.61 (0.80)	4.65 (0.72)	4.65 (0.72)	0.00	.00	0.75	.00	0.06	.00
Social sharing	5.43 (0.57)	5.05 (0.85)	5.37 (0.57)	4.93 (0.85)	5.25 (0.74)	5.15 (0.75)	5.40 (0.57)	4.99 (0.85)	0.99	.00	21.97**	.08	0.13	.00
Reg. self-eff.	4.72 (0.38)	4.56 (0.72)	4.81 (0.48)	4.67 (0.71)	4.64 (0.57)	4.74 (0.61)	4.76 (0.43)	4.62 (0.71)	1.80	.01	4.21*	.02	0.01	.00
Empathy	4.40 (0.52)	3.97 (0.87)	4.52 (0.64)	4.01 (0.72)	4.19 (0.74)	4.26 (0.73)	4.46 (0.58)	3.99 (0.80)	0.83	.00	30.68**	.11	0.23	.00

Note. Descriptive and inferential statistics for the 2 x 2 ANOVAs testing the emotion-by-closeness interaction effect on empathy, intention to regulate, extrinsic regulation processes and self-efficacy.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Reliability, descriptive statistics, and Pearson correlations between all study variables (N = 266).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Distant = 0, Close = 1	0.51	0.50	-											
2. Anger = 0, Anxiety = 1	0.49	0.50	-	-.01										
3. Rated closeness	3.89	1.31	.87	.66**	.10									
4. Rated anger	3.95	1.38	.97	.06	-.75**	.05								
5. Rated anxiety	4.22	0.96	.92	.05	.50**	.31**	-.06							
6. Intention to regulate	4.74	0.79	.89	.22**	.10	.41**	-.04	.18**						
7. Distraction	3.96	0.98	.93	-.01	.03	.11	.02	.09	.33**					
8. Humor	3.48	1.11	.96	.10	.12*	.24**	-.04	.09	.44**	.70**				
9. Reappraisal	4.61	0.77	.90	.05	.00	.19**	.02	.05	.54**	.45**	.41**			
10. Social Sharing	5.20	0.75	.95	.28**	-.06	.41**	.12	.14*	.68**	.16**	.33**	.42**		
11. Regulation self-efficacy	4.69	0.59	.87	.12*	.08	.26**	.03	.17**	.35**	.16*	.21**	.18**	.30**	
12. Empathy	4.23	0.73	.86	.32**	.05	.57**	.06	.28**	.56**	.19**	.32**	.29**	.56**	.24**

Note. Cronbach's alpha was computed using all items repeated across the three vignettes .

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .01$

Manipulation checks. Participants had significantly higher closeness ratings in the 'close' than 'distant' condition ($M=4.74$, $SD=3.01$ versus $M=3.01$, $SD=1.02$; $t(264)=14.28$, $p<.001$), significantly higher anger ratings in the 'anger' than 'anxiety' condition ($M=4.96$, $SD=0.84$ versus $M=2.88$, $SD=0.98$; $t(264)=18.62$, $p<.001$) and significantly higher anxiety ratings in the 'anxiety' than 'anger' condition ($M=4.71$, $SD=0.74$ versus $M=3.75$, $SD=0.90$; $t(264)=-9.49$, $p<.001$). All effects were extremely large (Cohen's $d = 1.17$ to 2.28), indicating successful manipulation.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 reports the pre-registered analyses: 2x2 ANOVAs testing the effects of emotion (anxiety/anger), closeness (close/distant) and the emotion-by-closeness interaction. We also report correlations between study variables (Table 2), as suggested in the review process.

H1: Emotion main effect. Humor was significantly higher in the 'anxiety' condition than the 'anger' condition, with a small-to-medium effect ($\eta^2=0.02$) in the opposite direction to hypotheses. No other effects of emotion type were significant. Hypothesis 1 was therefore not supported.

Correlations showed that target anger ratings showed no significant association with any outcome variable. However, target anxiety ratings were significantly correlated with regulation intention, higher social sharing (but no other regulation processes), regulation self-efficacy, and empathy. This suggests that the degree of target anxiety (but not anger) may affect extrinsic regulation.

H2: Closeness main effect. Participants in the 'close' condition scored significantly higher on intention to regulate (moderate effect; $\eta^2=.06$), social sharing (moderate effect; $\eta^2=.08$), regulation self-efficacy (small effect; $\eta^2 = .02$), and empathy (large effect; $\eta_p^2=.11$) than those in the 'distant' condition. There were no significant effects for distraction, humor,

or reappraisal. Hypothesis 2 has partial support.

Correlations showed that rated closeness was significantly related to greater humor, reappraisal, and social sharing (but not distancing). Rated closeness was also related to greater empathy, regulation intention, and regulation self-efficacy. All effects (except for humor) were in the hypothesized direction.

H3: Closeness/Emotion interaction. There were no significant closeness/emotion interaction effects. Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Discussion

There was a clear effect of closeness on emotion regulation at all three stages of the Extended Process Model—participants in the ‘close’ condition had higher intention to regulate (perception stage), higher social sharing (selection stage), higher regulation self-efficacy (implementation stage), as well as higher empathy. However, close condition had no significant effect on the other three processes (humor, distraction, or reappraisal). Pre-registered analyses showed little evidence for emotion type, or emotion-by-closeness interaction effects.

Emotion type and extrinsic regulation. We found no differences in emotion regulation between the ‘angry target’ and ‘anxious target’ conditions, despite prior research showing that people are hesitant to regulate others’ anger (López-Pérez & Pacella, 2019). However, *post-hoc* correlation analyses showed significant associations of target anxiety (but not anger) with greater regulation intention (perception stage), social sharing (selection stage), regulation self-efficacy (implementation stage), and empathy. The fact that perceived anxiety (but not experimentally-manipulated anxiety) showed some of the hypothesized effects highlights a limitation of treating anxiety and anger as mutually-exclusive experimentally-dependent categories (i.e., anger effects were confounded with anxiety effects). Future research could manipulate low versus high levels of anxiety to test whether the target anxiety levels affect extrinsic regulation.

Closeness and extrinsic regulation. When the target was a close friend, people had higher intention to regulate (perception stage), used more social sharing (selection stage), had greater regulation self-efficacy (implementation stage), and had more empathy for the target. At the selection stage, our pre-registered analyses found support for only one of the four hypothesized effects (social sharing), although post hoc correlation analyses also showed significant positive associations for closeness/reappraisal (as hypothesized) and closeness/humor (opposite direction to hypothesis). Further research is required to replicate the hypothesized closeness/social sharing link.

Inter-correlations among the regulation processes suggest that reappraisal might not be characterized as a high-engagement process (reappraisal showed similar associations with social sharing, humor, and distraction). Niven et al. (2015) proposed that reappraising *another person's cognitions* may be viewed as 'splaining'—telling another person you know best about their own thoughts, rather than listening to what they have to say. This is diametrically-opposed to social sharing, and may not represent high engagement. Social sharing *by the target* represents intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation (regulating your own emotions through interactions with others; Zaki & Williams, 2013), and is motivated by strengthening social bonds (Bucich & MacCann, 2019). Regulators may select interpersonal processes (like social sharing) requiring targets' active involvement only for targets likely to accept the regulation attempt to build the relationship (i.e., close targets). Regulation choice influences the strength and quality of their close relationships (English et al., 2013), and our results suggest extrinsic social sharing characterises close relationships.

Future directions. Follow-up research could examine additional emotions (e.g., sadness) and relevant regulation processes, such as direct situation modification (solving the target's problem), situation selection (avoiding the target/giving space), or acceptance (helping the target accept their emotions/situation). Future research could examine regulation goals (e.g., altruistic versus self-focused) as proximal causes of regulation choice. Future

research might also consider both target and regulator perspectives (which may ameliorate the effects of impression management and self-deceptive enhancement on self-ratings).

Moreover, generalizing results to different samples would test the robustness of findings (our sample was predominantly female and relatively young).

In summary, our research adds to the small but rapidly growing evidence base for extrinsic regulation, showing that closeness to the target affects regulation intention, regulation processes used, and evaluation of success.

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