human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

human relations
2014, Vol. 67(9) 1073–1094

DOI: 10.1177/0018726714529316
hum.sagepub.com
SAGE

Emotional roulette? Symmetrical and asymmetrical emotion regulation outcomes from coworker interactions about positive and negative work events

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that, in general, the disclosure of positive emotions at work results in positive consequences for individuals while the disclosure of negative emotions results in negative ones. The current study examines the possibility of *asymmetrical* emotional outcomes to such disclosures, including those associated with the sharing of positive emotions. Interviews with human service workers elicited 71 detailed descriptions of emotional work events, the majority of which (77%) had been discussed in some manner with coworkers. Qualitative analysis of the incident data shows that both symmetrical and asymmetrical emotion regulation outcomes resulted from these coworker interactions. In regard to the disclosure of negative emotions, an asymmetrical outcome (mitigation) was welcomed, whereas for positive emotions, a symmetrical outcome (capitalization) was desired. Group norms, leader behaviors and coworker responsiveness influenced whether and which emotional events were shared, as well as the net impact on the participant's emotional state. Overall, participants conveyed less motivation to share their positive emotional experiences with colleagues than their negative ones, largely owing to concerns that an asymmetrical outcome (dampening) would occur. Implications for organizational theories of emotional labor and social support, as well as the practice of effective emotion regulation in the workplace, are presented.

Keywords

burnout, emotion in organizations, emotional labour, group communication, healthcare organizations, organizational psychology, stress

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Few things in life are as messy as emotions. This is especially true in one particular aspect of our social existence: our work lives. As research on emotions in organizations has shown, all manner of job-related events can trigger spontaneous and powerful negative feelings such as anger and sadness or, conversely, positive emotions such as affection and happiness (Ashforth and Humphrey, 2011; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Studies of human behavior have long established that people are driven to regulate their emotions in some manner and that they often talk to family and friends as one approach to doing so (Gross, 1998; Rimé et al., 1998). However, less is known about how and to what effect workers engage colleagues in their emotion regulation efforts, even though we know that social support *overall* can have various effects on job attitudes, behaviors and performance (Beehr et al., 2003; Diefendorff et al., 2008). The process of regulating one's emotions through social interactions at work is complicated because employees must navigate their organization's explicit and implicit norms about emotional expression or 'display rules' (Hochschild, 1983). In the typical occupational setting, display rules encourage the expression of positive emotions but not negative ones, although experience sampling methods have shown that both are regularly felt (Kramer and Hess, 2002; Miner et al., 2005). Underlying this normative emphasis is the assumption that symmetrical outcomes are attached to emotional disclosures at work – that is, positive consequences stem from the expression of positive emotions while negative consequences stem from the expression of negative emotions (Lindebaum and Fielden, 2010). Indeed, past research shows that the expression of positive affect at work generally benefits the individual expressing it, as well as his or her work group, customers and even the organization as a whole (Fredrickson, 2001; Reis et al., 2010). Analogously, the expression of negative affect has been shown to have deleterious effects upon individuals, groups and organizations (Brown et al., 2005; Rozin and Royzman, 2001).

Yet, this tidy parallelism does not hold up under scrutiny. Recently, researchers have shown that in some circumstances the expression of negative emotions can *benefit* a worker and his or her workgroup (Dasborough, 2006; Lindebaum and Fielden, 2010). Moreover, the opposite kind of asymmetry in which there is a *cost* of expressing positive emotions in organizations may also exist. This possibility has been under-studied, especially in a work context, although some research has found negative repercussions to expressing happiness and pride in other social situations (Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000; Tracy and Robins, 2007). More research is needed to explicate the circumstances under which both symmetrical and asymmetrical outcomes to emotional disclosures occur in organizational environments (Hayward and Tuckey, 2011). To deepen our understanding of these issues, the current study collects narrative accounts of coworker interactions about positive and negative work events. By tracing the process of emotion regulation at the level of the emotional incident, we may untangle some of the complex threads that comprise our emotional lives at work (Lazarus, 2000).

Regulating emotions through coworker interactions

As Gross (1999: 528) noted, '[e]motions not only make us feel something, they make us feel like *doing* something' (emphasis in original). Gross (1998) defines emotion regulation as the processes by which individuals influence the nature, experience and

expression of their emotions. Indeed, longstanding psychological evidence indicates that the evocation of emotions sets off an 'action response' in human beings that drives them to try to regulate, manage and control these emotions so as to maintain their state of emotional equilibrium (Gross, 1998; Lazarus, 1991). Brown et al. (2005) present a conceptual model of how stressful work events can lead to adverse emotional reactions, which in turn can disrupt attention and effort. This disruption evokes a coping response to regain emotional equanimity so that normal performance efforts can be resumed. Diefendorff et al. (2008) similarly explored the regulation strategies used by workers to avoid or cope with unwanted emotional experiences at work. Other researchers have focused on the regulatory responses that positive events may trigger (Bono et al., 2013; Fredrickson, 2001). According to Gable et al. (2004, 2006), 'coping' is not exclusively the purview of negative situations because humans are also motivated to manage their positive experiences in some manner. The effort may be intended to extend and assimilate the good feelings that have arisen rather than reduce and replace them, but both are potential forms of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). Thus, any thoughts or actions intended to maximize or mitigate negative *or* positive emotions in the desired direction are defined as emotion regulation strategies here (Lambert et al., 2012; Reis et al., 2010).

As research has shown, the specific emotion regulation activities undertaken after a positive or negative event will depend on many factors related to the individual (e.g. emotional intelligence, personality, gender), as well as the environment in which he or she operates (e.g. norms, culture) (Coupland et al., 2008; Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux, 2000; Neff and Karney, 2005; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Across individuals and situations, however, one common means of regulating emotions is to talk about them with others (Gross, 1998; Reis et al., 2010). Rimé and colleagues coined the term 'social sharing of emotion' to encapsulate those occasions when a person communicates his or her personal experience of an emotional event to some addressee (Rimé et al., 1998). Rimé et al. (1992) reported that 88–96 percent of the 1384 emotional episodes collected through their studies were socially shared in some manner. Both Rimé et al. (1998) and Gable et al. (2004) found that spouses, other family members and friends were typically the targets of emotion sharing episodes in the personal domain.

While talking with friends and family may be a viable strategy for processing personal events, the current study is concerned with emotional events as they occur in the work domain. Conceptually, coworkers serve as highly logical targets for the sharing of emotional reactions that occur at work (Beehr et al., 2003; Daniels et al., 2008). This is true for several reasons. First, emotion regulation has been shown to involve time-sensitive processes (Rimé et al., 1998). The physical and relational proximity of coworkers during the workday thereby is likely to increase their attractiveness as potential emotion regulation partners. Second, fellow members of a work group have a wealth of shared experience and knowledge to draw upon, which may make them particularly helpful partners in the processing of one's workplace emotions. Indeed, as Thoits (1984) argues, we need others who are socially similar to ourselves in coping with peak emotions, those who can provide 'empathetic understanding' by virtue of having experienced the same kinds of situations and responses. Third, coworkers are well-positioned to provide not only emotional but also instrumental forms of support (including resources, information and advice) to help manage one's emotion-laden work situations (Bowling et al., 2004;

Cohen and Wills, 1985; Fenlason and Beehr, 1994). Therefore, although it may not be the only tactic employed by workers, sharing with coworkers is likely to be an important means of regulating emotions in organizations (Lively, 2000). The current study seeks to confirm not only whether such interactions occur, but also, more importantly, to explore why and to what effect they do so.

Tradeoffs involved in regulating negative and positive emotions with coworkers

Despite the potential benefits of regulating one's emotional reactions through interactions with coworkers, this tactic is not without risk. The typical workplace contains a set of implicit display rules or conventions about the appropriateness of emotional expression (Diefendorff and Greguras, 2009). Empirical research suggests that the consequences of ignoring these norms can be dire: when employees violate their organization's display rules, others may view them as less professional and committed (Coupland et al., 2008; Kramer and Hess, 2002). Furthermore, expressing inappropriate emotions can lead to lower job performance ratings, organizational penalties and job instability (Fineman, 2000; Geddes and Stickney, 2011). Thus, Lindebaum (2012) argues that the modern worker faces a 'commodification of emotion' in organizations, which limit them to expressing only a narrow set of sanitized and standardized emotions at work. Emotional labor is often required to meet those expectations, which involves efforts to suppress and modify one's true feelings (Hochschild, 1983).

The literature on emotional labor indicates that the most commonly acceptable emotions to express in organizations are positive ones (Lively, 2000). Indeed, Kramer and Hess (2002: 76) assert that it is 'a general, understood principle' that workers should suppress or hide their negative workplace emotions while at work and manifest positive ones instead. This principle is based on the assumption that workers gain from the sharing of positive emotions and are hampered by the sharing of negative ones. Indeed, workers who express positive emotions have been rated as having higher work capabilities and performance, as well as better interpersonal relationships (Fredrickson, 2001; Grandey, 2000). The sharing of positive emotions may also generate good feelings in others through implicit emotional contagion effects (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield et al., 1994). Thus, talking about positive emotions may lead to their capitalization, which Gable et al. (2004: 228) define as 'the process of informing another person about the occurrence of a personal positive event and thereby deriving additional benefit from it' (see also Langston, 1994).

In a similar manner, sharing negative emotions and experiences at work may generate symmetrical outcomes for individuals. In this case, poor consequences may stem from expressing negative emotions. For example, Brown et al. (2005) found that the act of venting to colleagues exacerbated the adverse effects of the worker's negative emotions on his or her performance. Therefore, expressing negative emotions may harm rather than aid an individual's emotional state (Diefendorff and Greguras, 2009). Expressing negative emotions may also 'infect' others through contagion processes (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield et al., 1994).

A growing body of research, however, identifies the potential for asymmetrical effects of emotion-sharing in the workplace. In particular, some studies have shown that expressing negative emotions in organizations, particularly anger, can benefit

employees (Gibson and Callister, 2010). Lindebaum and Fielden (2010), for example, found that construction managers deliberately expressed anger to increase their social standing and respect among coworkers. Other research has shown that expressions of sadness and distress can generate interpersonal gains in terms of social connectedness (Gray et al., 2011; Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2001). While the assumption that negative emotional displays are always 'bad' for individuals and their organizations is being questioned, more studies are required to further identify the conditions under which asymmetrical, as well as symmetrical, outcomes occur (Côté, 2005).

There may also be a downside to sharing positive emotions in organizations. Expressions of pride have been shown to engender envy in others (Duffy and Shaw, 2000), for example, which may then trigger self-conscious feelings and behaviors on the part of the worker and possibly retaliation by others (Van de Ven et al., 2010). Moreover, in their study, Diefendorff and Greguras (2009) found that feelings of happiness were sometimes masked or de-emphasized in interactions with colleagues to avoid looking unprofessional in some manner. Thus, there exists the intriguing possibility that sharing positive emotions with coworkers may result in the asymmetric effect of incurring negative consequences for individuals and organizations.

Framing this study

This study focuses upon the nature and outcomes of interpersonal interactions held with coworkers about positive and negative emotional events at work. Specifically, the research questions governing this investigation are:

1. After experiencing an emotionally positive or negative work event, is it common for workers to talk to colleagues about the event?
2. What are the symmetrical and asymmetrical outcomes of such interactions in terms of the emotional state of the worker?
3. What conditions are associated with more 'successful' emotional outcomes?

As Garot (2004) notes, a phenomenological perspective on emotion-related issues such as these requires the collection and analysis of qualitative data. In the current study, interviews are conducted to gather narrative accounts of specific emotional incidents and the emotion regulation efforts that followed. Of particular interest are those regulation efforts that involve talking with other colleagues as a form of social sharing of emotion. A template analytic approach is used to incorporate frameworks from past research while still allowing for new insights and connections to be gleaned from the data (King, 2004).

Method

Sample

Human service workers (e.g. doctors, social workers and public defenders) were sought out for the study because previous research has shown their occupations are 'emotion-rich' and therefore likely to regularly include emotional work events (Johnson et al.,

2005). Interview participants were identified through referrals (both from personal contacts and early-stage participants) using a purposive sampling approach to find diversity in terms of organization, profession and clientele. A total of 42 individuals were identified and interviewed. Of that total, 34 participants (27 female and seven male) provided at least one detailed account during the interview of a recent client-centered emotional event at work, which became the basis for the primary analyses. Data from the remaining eight participants were used to elaborate the framework and ideas presented here.

The participants in this study worked at 13 different types of organizations, including hospitals (adult, pediatric, psychiatric), private medical clinics, disaster relief organizations, state judicial organizations, a drug treatment center, a nursing home, a hospice and an elementary school. The clientele of the participants was equally varied, including adult and pediatric patients with various medical disorders, sexually and physically abused children, chronically mentally ill adults, frail elderly adults, drug-addicted women and teens, morbidly obese adults, autistic and other special needs children, accused felons, divorced parents, disaster victims and terminally ill patients. The organizations were spread across the continental USA, located in the Northeast (7), West Coast (3), Southeast (2) and Midwest (1) regions.

Participants ranged in age from their late teens to mid-60s, with a modal age range of 30–39 years old (38%). The majority (68%) of participants had a college degree and 56 percent had an advanced graduate degree. Tenure in their occupational field ranged from one month to 45 years, with the average being 14 years. Tenure in their current work group ranged from one month to 25 years, with an average of six years.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect first-person accounts of discrete emotional experiences and their psychological aftermath (see Dasborough, 2006; Hayward and Tuckey, 2011). Participants were interviewed by the author in person (79%) or by telephone (21%) for 60 to 90 minutes. In-person interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, while detailed handwritten notes were taken and transcribed for the telephone interviews.

As part of the interview, participants were asked to describe specific cases involving (a) work-related triggering events, (b) emotional reactions, (c) emotion regulation tactics and (d) emotional outcomes (see Brown et al., 2005). To address (a), the author asked each participant to think of a recent occasion in which he or she experienced any kind of emotion (positive or negative) in reaction to a client interaction or work experience. Note that the events were restricted to client-centered ones to ensure that only work-related events were chosen and to provide some standardization across the human service occupations represented. After describing the client event or experience that triggered the emotional reaction, participants were then asked to describe (b) the emotions they felt immediately afterward. Next they were asked what they did after the event, including whether they (c) regulated their emotional experience in some manner through a conversation with one or more coworkers. If the participant did not volunteer that they had interacted with coworkers about the event, they were directly asked, ‘Did you talk to anyone at work about this?’ In cases in which some form of social sharing

occurred, participants were asked detailed questions about what they did, said, thought and felt during and after those coworker interactions. Follow-up questions probed for specific detail on the nature of coworker behaviors and verbal responses to the worker's emotional disclosures. Finally, participants were asked to describe (d) their emotional state immediately after any coworker interaction occurred. Once they answered all of the interview questions about the first incident, participants were asked to recall a second incident, but this time one with the opposite emotional valence. In the interviews, 88 percent of participants elected to start with a negative event first, which meant the majority of interviews concluded with the discussion of a positive event. If time remained, participants were asked to relate a third emotional incident of either valence.

During the interview, steps were taken to reduce retrospective and self-presentation biases (see Hayward and Tuckey, 2011). First, participants were asked to provide a recent incident in which they experienced a client-evoked emotion, ideally one that occurred in the past few weeks. This prompt attenuated participants' memory biases to some extent and also ensured that they could recall the level of detail required to answer the interview questions. Second, to reduce potential self-presentation biases, the questions themselves were deliberately non-evaluative in nature. The emphasis throughout the interview was on reporting actual events and the participant's attendant thoughts, behaviors and emotions at the time they occurred as accurately as possible. In addition, participants were repeatedly reminded of the confidentiality and non-judgmental nature of the interview. The complete interview guide is available upon request from the author.

Altogether, narrative accounts of 71 emotional incidents and the discussions (if any) held with coworkers about them were collected through the interview protocol (mean of 2.1 incidents per participant). Identifying information (e.g. names of individuals and organizations) was removed from the data prior to analysis and pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Data analysis

Similar to Lindebaum and Fielden (2010), the coding of the interview data followed a template analysis approach. This approach, detailed by King (2004), represents a middle ground between purely deductive analysis, in which the data are applied to set categories, and purely inductive analysis, in which all categories emerge from the data (see also Boyatzis, 1998). In the current study, several broad themes from prior research guided the analyses, but the primary emphasis was on discovering details and connections within those themes through close examination of the narrative data.

The emotion regulation model of Brown et al. (2005) was used to organize the emotional incident data according to four themes or categories: (a) work-related triggering event, (b) emotional reaction, (c) emotion regulation tactic and (d) emotional outcome. Data in the latter two categories (emotion regulation tactic and emotional outcome) served as the primary source material for the current investigation. Note that for simplicity, the term 'worker' will be used to refer to the individual who experienced the client-evoked emotion and 'coworker(s)' will be used to represent the colleague(s) who received the emotional disclosure and engaged in an interpersonal exchange about it with the

worker. The term 'client' will be used for the recipient of care, whether a medical patient, student, child affected by custody arrangements, defendant or any other type of client.

Before addressing the main research questions of the study, the emotional incidents were divided by *dominant valence*. This involved distinguishing between work events that triggered positive reactions from those that triggered negative ones (see Basch and Fisher, 2000). For each incident, the author and a research associate who was not involved in data collection coded the overall valence of the worker's emotional reaction based on the descriptions of the client event provided, as well as the use of specific emotion terms (e.g. sad, happy, frustrated) or references to feeling 'good' or 'bad' about what happened. Generally, the emotions described were of the same valence, although 10 mixed-valence emotion examples were found (e.g. sadness mixed with hope; happiness mixed with worry). In those cases, the dominant emotion valence was identified and coded. There were no disagreements between the author and second coder in determining the overall valence of the events collected. Of the total dataset of 71 emotional incidents, 45 incidents (63%) were coded as negative in dominant valence and 26 incidents (37%) were coded as predominantly positive.

The first research question was *whether* workers engaged their coworkers in emotion-focused regulation efforts after a positive or negative work event occurred (Lazarus, 1991). To address this question, the author and same research associate involved in the valence coding evaluated each incident for the presence of a 'coworker interaction' involving the social sharing of emotion. Specifically, *coworker interactions* were defined as those involving an interpersonal exchange that included an implicit (e.g. eyes welling with tears) or explicit (e.g. 'I'm so happy!') disclosure of an emotional reaction about a work event from a worker to one or more coworkers (Gable et al., 2004; Rimé et al., 1998). The coders agreed on the categorization for 65 of the 71 incidents in the first round of coding; disagreements on the remaining cases were resolved through discussion ($\kappa = .78$; Randolph, 2008; Siegel and Castellan, 1988).

For the second research question of *to what effect* did those coworker interactions occur, the author and a new research associate coded emotional outcomes as symmetrical or asymmetrical. A *symmetrical outcome* was defined as one in which the emotional state of the worker was consistent in dominant valence before and after a coworker interaction. In other words, symmetrical outcomes captured cases in which a worker who shared positive emotions with a coworker reported feeling overall positively after the interaction, as well as cases in which a worker who shared negative emotions still felt overall negatively afterward. Under this definition, even an interaction that was experienced as having little or no effect on the emotional state of the worker was considered a symmetrical outcome because the dominant valence of his or her emotional state remained the same. An *asymmetrical outcome*, by contrast, always involved change, defined as an experience in which the dominant valence of the worker's emotional state was countervailed or undermined in some manner through the interaction – from negative to positive or from positive to negative. In five of the 71 emotional incidents, there was initial disagreement between the coders regarding the type of outcome; these differences were subsequently discussed and resolved ($\kappa = .82$; Randolph, 2008; Siegel and Castellan, 1988). Table 1 contains abbreviated case examples of each outcome.

Table 1. Abbreviated examples of emotional incident data by type of outcome.

Worker	Mia, a nurse practitioner	Byron, a patient representative	Christine, a guardian ad lightum	Malena, a physician's assistant
Context	Nursing home	Pediatric hospital	Court system	Medical clinic
Triggering event	An elderly patient continued to complain about her health despite nurse Mia's efforts to help her.	Byron watched TV with a 5-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who was 'laughing the whole time' despite being immobilized in a metal brace from the chest down.	Guardian ad lightum (court-appointed representative in child custody cases) Christine had a difficult interaction with a father who was trying to circumvent her authority.	After a longstanding patient relapsed in his alcohol addiction, Malena found out that he was making a new effort to seek treatment.
Emotional reaction	*Negative* (Frustration, anger, helplessness)	*Positive* (Happiness, affection, satisfaction)	*Negative* (Anger, annoyance, frustration)	*Positive* (Relief, pride, happiness)
Interaction with coworker(s)	During a staff meeting, Mia interrupted the agenda to say she'd 'had it' with the patient and did not have the emotional energy to deal with her. The team expressed concern and support in the meeting and to Mia afterward.	Byron mentioned to a coworker how he had enjoyed his interaction with the young patient and admired the boy's spirit. The coworker responded saying, 'Yeah, he's a really cute kid,' and told him about her own experiences with the patient.	In discussing the case with other team members, Christine described what she had experienced and how aggravated she was by the father. The coworkers commiserated. One said, 'I can't believe what a narcissistic asshole this guy is!'	Malena told a coworker about the patient's renewed commitment to sobriety with excitement. The coworker laughed at Malena's optimistic response, saying 'I think you'd better get back to Al-Anon!' [Malena was formerly married to an alcoholic]
Emotional outcome	*More negative* ('It was a bit, being vulnerable like that, it was a bit uncomfortable. And you know they had a card "hoping that you're on the mend." I'm like the sick person, giving me a card and flowers.')	*More positive* ('Well it was nice to see that she had seen and experienced the same thing. It was one of those things where you gain greater appreciation, some life lessons.')	*More positive* ('Well, being able to just express the irritation helped to relieve that, and being able to laugh at it and share the irritation with somebody else, in that case with the two men who experienced the same thing, that was helpful.')	*More negative* ('I didn't like how she reacted to [what I said] and it really offended me.')
Outcome	Symmetrical	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical	Asymmetrical

For the final research question of *what conditions* were associated with the successful regulation of emotion with coworkers, template analysis was continued to identify and refine the codes and themes associated with the work context and interaction features (King, 2004). For this, the author used iterative data coding to identify commonalities in coworker interactions associated with each type of outcome, as well as aspects of the broader work environment that participants described as being relevant to their emotion regulation efforts and outcomes (Boyatzis, 1998). Qualitative coding was performed using the Atlas.ti software program (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, 2005 and 2013, Versions 5.0, 7.0).

Results

Presence of coworker interactions

In total, 55 of the 71 reported emotional incidents (78%) were categorized as including a coworker interaction. Coworker interactions were common in both positive (19 of 26 cases) and negative (36 of 45 cases) incidents. For both positive and negative work events, the coworker interactions were most commonly executed in a one-to-one manner with a female peer. This was true for both men and women in the study. In addition, the coworkers generally knew, liked and shared responsibility for the client in question. Interactions were typically spontaneous and brief in manner, often held immediately after the client event happened.

Distribution of outcomes

Of the 36 coworker interactions about a negative work event, 11 were categorized as resulting in a symmetrical emotion regulation outcome (negative to negative) while 25 had an asymmetrical one (negative to positive). Of the 19 interactions about positive work events, 18 were categorized as resulting in a symmetrical outcome (positive to positive) while one had an asymmetrical outcome (positive to negative). Thus, among the sample of 55 incidents involving a coworker incident, 53 percent had symmetrical emotional outcomes and 47 percent had asymmetrical emotional outcomes. An overview of each type of emotion regulation outcome by the initial valence of the emotional event is shown in Figure 1.

Nature of symmetrical outcomes

The case data were used to identify patterns regarding the nature of coworker interactions associated with each outcome. In addition, the incidents were analyzed for evidence as to why symmetrical and asymmetrical outcomes occurred and whether they were experienced as successful or unsuccessful (in terms of emotional outcome) by participants. These findings are presented for each of the four types of outcomes: rumination, capitalization, mitigation and dampening.

Rumination. In roughly one-third of the negative event cases (30%), participants reported symmetrical outcomes from coworker interactions about their emotions. That is, the

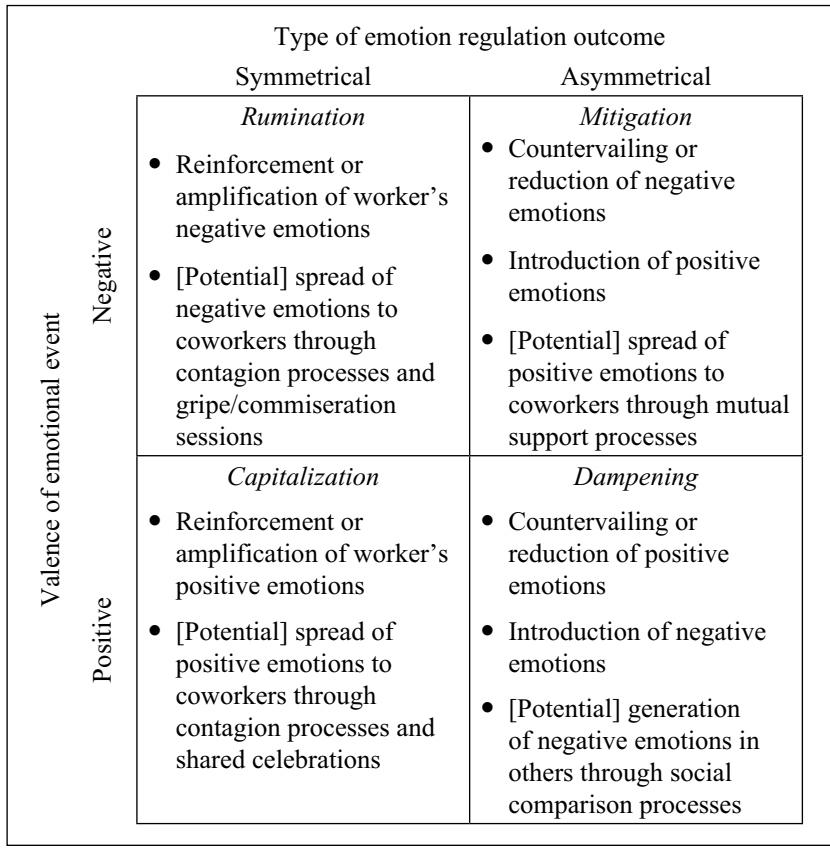

Figure 1. Symmetrical and asymmetrical emotion regulation outcomes by initial valence of the emotional event.

worker's negative emotions were exacerbated or reinforced through talking to coworkers about them. This type of outcome is labeled 'rumination' to use a term consistent with the existing literature (Rimé et al., 1992). As one participant reflected,

> I actually found [the interaction] not very satisfying, because when I talked to her about it, she talked to me a lot about a case that she was having that was really sad and hard also. So I felt like we both having such a stressful day, or a stressful week, that we both needed to vent to someone, but couldn't really hear another person's pain at that point, because we were just full of our own.

Other interactions were viewed as symmetrical because they served to introduce *new* negative emotions on the part of the worker, such as feelings of self-consciousness, embarrassment and anxiety, as in the case of Mia described in Table 1. Such discussions could also evoke discomfort and guilt related to sharing negative information and opinions about others. For example, after a joint complaint session about a patient's mother, one participant related, 'I felt better because I had taken that out of my system. But I also

felt guilty.' The interview data indicate that symmetrical outcomes to negative emotion disclosures were overall viewed as unsuccessful by participants in terms of their net emotional impact.

Capitalization. Symmetrical emotional outcomes were found in almost all (95%) of the positive examples collected and were viewed favorably. In such 'capitalization' outcomes (Gable et al., 2004; Langston, 1994), positive emotions were magnified or reinforced through coworker interactions. As one participant commented, 'Oh, I really think that [my feelings] were amplified . . . that can sort of really carry me.' Another said that after talking with coworkers, 'you still kind of keep on that high note'. A third described the joy of 'hootin' and 'hollering' with coworkers over her successful intervention with a client. As indicated by these quotes, participants reported feeling even better after having their positive emotions amplified through coworker interactions, representing a successful outcome.

Nature of asymmetrical outcomes

Mitigation. In the majority of negative event cases (70%), asymmetrical emotional outcomes occurred. That is, interactions with coworkers were reported as lessening or reversing the negative emotions felt. This type of outcome is labeled 'mitigation' (Van Eck et al., 1998). One participant recalled, 'I wasn't flying with frustration or anything, but it's always nice to talk and get something off your chest.' This release of emotional tension was frequently referred to as 'venting,' as when a participant said, 'I just feel better that I vented.' Similarly, a participant said that social processing was a 'relief . . . you feel better, once you can kind of get it out there.' In addition to a feeling of catharsis, participants described experiencing a renewed energy from talking about their negative emotions with coworkers. For example, one participant described:

> When something kind of hurt us about a patient, [we talk about it] . . . I mean, not in the way of breaking privacy or anything, it's like to take out the emotions. To fill up your gas tank so you can help another family again.

This type of asymmetrical outcome, in which negative emotions were discharged or reduced, was viewed as successful by participants.

Dampening. Among positive event examples, only one coworker interaction (5%) was coded as including an asymmetrical outcome. This final type of outcome is categorized as 'dampening' (Diener et al., 1991). In this particular case, the worker felt the coworker dismissed her jubilation about a patient as overly optimistic and personally biased, as shown in Table 1. In the interview, Malena described the defensiveness that her colleague's response evoked and how she tried to justify her feelings of relief and pride to her. Ultimately, Malena reported that she felt deflated and hurt after sharing her good feelings about the patient with her coworker, an unsuccessful emotion regulation outcome.

While there was only one case of dampening in the dataset, the interviews overall indicated that the *possibility* of this asymmetrical outcome was salient in the minds of participants. When asked about cases in which they chose not to share their positive emotions with others (seven out of 26 cases), for example, many individuals referred to expectations that their positive feelings would be reduced or inverted by expressing them to colleagues. In particular, interviewees conveyed concerns that sharing their positive emotions would generate envy or resentment from their coworkers, which in turn would make them feel anxious or defensive. Even happiness and satisfaction were considered by many study participants to be too risky to express. One participant, when asked why he did not tell anyone at work about how good it made him feel to receive a patient compliment, said, 'I don't want anyone to ever think that [I'm bragging] . . . That's personal.' Another participant responded, when asked why she did not tell anyone about her pride after helping a young patient,

> Because I think everybody feels like they are good people, and that's why they are here. So when you are just like, 'You are a good person' [pats self on the back] . . . [it is like saying] 'I'm great!' [laughs].

Thus, while asymmetrical outcomes to positive event disclosures rarely occurred in the present dataset, the results indicate that participants' behavior was influenced by the possibility they could occur. According to the interviewees, the potential upside of capitalizing upon their positive emotions was often not worth the potential downside of having them lessened or replaced by negative ones. For these reasons, they reported withholding the sharing of positive events with their colleagues. As one participant said, 'You just kind of think about [the happiness], but you don't really think it is pertinent for somebody else to know it.'

Conditions supporting successful emotion regulation outcomes

Data analyses revealed that there were certain conditions that supported the experience of successful emotion regulation experiences from the perspective of the participants – that is, the asymmetrical mitigation of negative emotions and the symmetrical capitalization of positive emotions. These conditions had to do with three contextual factors: group norms, supervisor behaviors and coworker responsiveness.

Group norms. According to participants, the norms of the work group strongly influenced the amount and type of emotions they felt comfortable sharing with colleagues. Some groups had norms that were supportive of the regular disclosure of emotions at work. One participant stated that, 'with everybody there, we talk about the good things or the bad things.' Yet in other groups, a different norm was quite evident – to avoid sharing emotions with each other. As one participant described it: 'Talking about the emotional impact it's having on you isn't really something that is the norm to do that. You're supposed to do your job and then move on to the next thing.' The group norms thus influenced the frequency of emotional event sharing at work.

Group norms also influenced *which* emotional events were shared with others. Often, only a narrow set of emotions were viewed as allowable within a given work group. In the current dataset, those norms typically favored the disclosure of negative emotions and events. As one participant stated, 'I think it's easier to talk about frustration, those sort of things we really easily want you to express – frustration, exasperation, anger. I think we can much more easily express that.' Another described: 'Positive [events] are not so much formally addressed, although occasionally there'll be, "Kudos to Bonnie for her work with [client]" . . . The positive stuff happens more informally. There isn't time for it.' Similarly, when another participant was asked why she did not share her positive emotions with coworkers, her response was, 'It's just we don't really get into that side of things.' Thus, the data indicate that group norms varied but, overall, were viewed as more supportive of sharing a select set of negative emotions with coworkers rather than emotions of all kinds, including positive ones. Furthermore, the participants indicated that as perceived restrictions increased, so did the perceived risk of incurring an undesirable outcome from coworker interactions.

Supervisor behaviors. The behavior and style of supervisors or organizational leaders also influenced the perceived risks of sharing emotions with colleagues. Some supervisors were viewed as actively encouraging coworker interactions about emotions. As one participant described: '[Our director] Carolina is always concerned, if she sees you with your face like this [sad face], she will catch it and say, "What is happening with you today? Something is happening."' By contrast, other supervisors or leaders were viewed as intentionally or unintentionally suppressing emotional disclosures by workers. Indeed, one participant who managed his work group stated:

> Throughout my work experience, I have learned not to show your emotions at work . . . If a staff member is having a problem with regard to emotions, I just tell them to have a break right away. Because I don't want patients to see that or other staff members to see that.

There were rare instances in the case data in which the leader was described as actively seeking or encouraging the processing of *positive* emotions, such as a case in which the supervisor asked during a meeting, 'Has anything happened that you feel good about?' For the most part though, leaders in this study were described as being supportive of the disclosure and discussion of negative emotional events more so than positive ones.

Coworker responsiveness. The contextual features of group norms and leader behaviors influenced the rate and nature of coworker interactions about positive and negative emotions, as well as the risk of undesirable outcomes. The driving feature of whether a symmetrical or asymmetrical outcome occurred for a worker's given emotional event, however, was the *responsiveness* of the coworker during the interaction. In particular, one of the key differentiators between cases with desirable emotional outcomes (negative/asymmetrical and positive/symmetrical) versus undesirable ones (negative/symmetrical and positive/asymmetrical) was the amount of validation received from the

coworker during the social interaction. Validation is defined as feedback from others that a worker's view is reasonable, appropriate and/or effective (Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2001).

In their discussions of emotional events with colleagues, participants reported seeking confirmatory feedback that they had correctly interpreted the precipitating situation and that their positive or negative emotions were therefore justified. Four participants actually used the term 'validation' as a key aspect of the social sharing interaction. For example, one study participant described his experience about a frustrating case in the following manner:

> That was positive. Not in the sense that somebody said, 'you did a good job' but that the validation came in that you'd gone the whole nine yards with this case and you can't go any farther, and what I did and what I had to say had an impact on a child.

Another participant said, 'I think what she said made me feel better, when she said it was the mother's choice, it was like, well, I couldn't have done anything else.' The drive for confirmatory feedback was present in cases of positive as well as negative emotion. As one participant said, 'I talked to the social worker who was there afterward. I usually touch base with her mostly in order to make sure that it was "okay" to feel the satisfaction.' Another participant expressed with relief, 'It wasn't just me feeling hopeful. There was [sic] other data out there.'

Overall, participants associated helpful outcomes with receiving some form of validation, although negative emotions could be validated to the point that a less-desired symmetrical outcome occurred as well. For example, after having commiserated with a colleague about their mutual frustration and anger, one participant described how she felt even more hopeless about a difficult patient situation. Cases of guilt and dissatisfaction could also stem from a shared 'bitch session', as one participant put it. Therefore, the data showed that receiving validation could both enhance and undermine the emotion regulation process.

Discussion

The central aim of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of whether, why and to what effect employees talk to each other about emotional events in the workplace – both positive and negative. In regard to the first and most basic question of whether such interactions happen at all, the answer is clearly *yes*: 77 percent of the emotional work events reported in this study were socially shared in some manner with coworkers. This is consistent with the high levels of social sharing previously found for emotional events in the personal domain (Gable et al., 2004; Rimé et al., 1998). Moreover, the findings generate new evidence and insights regarding the asymmetries embedded in emotional experiences at work. From these results, implications for theory and practice emerge, including potential leverage points for organizations interested in modifying the patterns found here.

Asymmetries within and between positive and negative events

The current study has illuminated several asymmetries in regard to the regulation of positive and negative emotional events. Asymmetries were found both *within* the span of a single incident (positive emotions turning negative and vice versa) and *between* incidents of different valence (positive versus negative events). Within the span of a social sharing incident, results showed that coworker interactions may contribute to an inversion of emotional valence. In the case of negative events, this countervailing effect was welcomed by participants as it meant their unpleasant feelings were lessened or mitigated. As such, these cases are consistent with recent evidence that certain negative emotional displays can result in positive outcomes for individuals in organizations (Geddes and Stickney, 2011; Lindebaum and Fielden, 2010). Conversely, the data also show that positive emotions can be countervailed through interactions with coworkers in an asymmetric input-output relationship. In the current study, workers anticipated that their disclosures might waste the time and energy of their colleagues, or worse yet, generate a backlash of resentment and hostility. Detert and Edmondson (2011: 470) similarly found evidence that employees will avoid actions or comments that would make them 'look like a show-off, not a team player' even if the individual was ostensibly trying to make a positive contribution. Kramer and Hess (2002) found that positive emotional displays could be viewed as inappropriate in some contexts as well. Thus, the current study provides additional empirical evidence that coworker interactions can trigger both asymmetrical (mitigation, dampening) and symmetrical (rumination, capitalization) outcomes to emotional disclosures at work.

Second, the study underscores the asymmetries that exist between how positive and negative events are viewed and regulated by individuals in organizations. In general, the participants reported experiencing positive emotions with the same or greater frequency as negative emotions in their work with clients. For example, one participant said, 'Oh, the positive definitely is more than the negative. [My job is] very rewarding.' Yet, almost 90 percent of those interviewed chose to describe a negative event as their initial example of a recent emotional work experience. Even after interviewer prompting, the positive event descriptions were comparably lower in number, detail and specificity, generating an average of 44 percent less codeable text per example than negative event descriptions. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that positive events may be weaker than negative events in terms of salience and complexity, consistent with the notion of a 'negativity bias' (Rozin and Royzman, 2001).

The story does not end there, however. This study's results also indicate that there are asymmetrical *risks* associated with processing positive and negative emotions with others at work. As shown in the data, participants did not view the potential upside to sharing positive and negative events equally. Participants described how when feeling badly about a work event, they were often willing to risk the chance of feeling incrementally worse for the potentially (large) gain of feeling better. In contrast, an apparent ceiling effect was in place for positive events in that people were already feeling good and did not want to risk having those emotions diminished through sharing them with other people. Thus, the evidence does not necessarily indicate that positive events are less impactful emotionally on workers, as others have contended (Rozin and Royzman, 2001).

Instead, positive emotions may in fact be so important and valuable to workers that they are guarded more carefully, including restricting their disclosure to colleagues to avoid having them dampened.

Theoretical and practical implications

A number of theoretical and practical implications derive from the results of this study. First, the findings contribute to the literature regarding the role of coworkers in emotion regulation processes. While prior studies using survey measures have shown us that coworkers can serve as an important source of social support to employees *in general*, the field has lacked a full exploration of exactly what happens during those supportive interactions and their impact on the processing of specific emotional events (Huffmeier and Hertel, 2011). The accounts presented here illustrate how talking with coworkers – even for just a few minutes – can influence the nature and duration of emotional incidents at work. Similarly, Gable et al. (2004) underscores the importance of partner 'responsiveness' in achieving individual and interpersonal gains from the sharing of emotional experiences with others. Thus, the current findings confirm that the specific reactions of interaction partners (coworkers) matter for the emotional well-being of workers, a nuance that has often been missed in research using aggregate measures of social support (Daniels et al., 2008; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus, 2000).

Moreover, the findings carry new implications for theories and research on emotional labor and display rules. In the emotional labor literature, the emphasis has been on the display of positive emotions and the suppression of negative ones (e.g. Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Indeed, Kramer and Hess (2002: 76) assert that 'masking negative emotions appears to be part of the general rules of civility that are learned as part of the socialization process into organizations.' By contrast, however, the participants in the current study reported greater willingness to share their negative emotions than their positive ones – and even reported that their group norms and leader behaviors facilitated that emphasis. This finding may illustrate the difference between what Diefendorff and Richard (2008) call prescriptive (i.e. normative) and contextual (i.e. descriptive) display rules. By examining specific emotional episodes, we have learned more about how display rules are interpreted and manifested in practice in organizations, in contrast to the general prescriptive rules more commonly highlighted by research and theory.

Furthermore, the current study contributes to the work on emotional labor by focusing on employee-to-employee displays of emotion, rather than employee-to-customer/client displays, as has historically been the focus of research (Hulsheger and Schewe, 2011). Indeed, in the current study, some participants noted a disparity between what they felt they had to show their clients, such as patience and sympathy, with what they were really feeling, such as frustration and disdain. As evidenced, however, the need to process their true feelings in some manner was still present. Theoretically, this might mean that work environments with strong prescriptive and contextual display rules geared towards expressing positive emotions toward those *outside* the organization may inadvertently cause more displays of negative emotions *within* the organization. This may be especially true in those cases where workers have not truly internalized (such as through deep acting) the positive emotions they are expected to display to their clients and customers

(Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). In other words, the mandate to provide care and service to others 'with a smile on one's face' may inadvertently generate the display of more grimaces than grins in the back office.

Finally, an important practical implication from this study's results is that we may be missing out on the powerful, cascading advantages to be gained from sharing positive emotional events with others at work. At the individual level, workers may not experience the bolstering effect to their social and cognitive resources, not to mention the boost to their resilience, which can come from the capitalization of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Gable et al., 2004). At a wider level, organizations may forgo the benefits to be found from spreading positive affect and best practices through the collective processing of positive work events (Barsade, 2002; Lambert et al., 2012). As one participant ruefully observed about his workplace, 'I think there are too few celebrations of the highs, and too many celebrations of the lows.'

Leverage points for organizations

This study points to several leverage points that might beneficially influence the interpersonal processing of positive and negative workplace emotions. First, organizational practices that foster a culture of compassion and openness may be helpful to set the stage for prescriptive and contextual display rules that allow for a diverse array of emotional expression (Lilius et al., 2011). Second, group leaders may be enlisted to model the social sharing of both positive and negative emotional events at work, as well as supportive responses to such disclosures (Brown et al., 2005; Gable et al., 2006). Third, human resource training and development programs could educate workers regarding the options available for emotion regulation and to provide a safe space for testing new ways of doing so (Grant, 2013; Heaney et al., 1995). These types of interventions at the cultural, managerial and interpersonal level are likely to reduce the commodification of emotion present in many organizations and enhance workplace emotion regulation overall (Lindebaum, 2012).

Study limitations and future research

The qualitative method of data collection and analysis used in the current study was well-suited to studying emotional experiences from a phenomenological perspective (Garot, 2004; Lazarus, 2000), but it does have limits in terms of statistical power and predictability. Quantitative approaches (e.g. daily surveys) could be used to analyze and model the patterns of cause and effect reported here. Population sampling techniques could also be used to test how common are each of the four main outcomes in practice, as compared with the distribution found in this sample. In addition, to generalize the findings regarding outcomes and conditions, research methods not reliant upon self-report (e.g. field observations, laboratory studies) and studies with other populations with varying work, individual and environmental characteristics would be useful. Finally, action-based research is warranted to systematically develop and test the workplace interventions suggested by the study findings.

Conclusion

In the work environments studied here, sharing positive and negative emotional events led to asymmetrical outcomes nearly as often as symmetrical ones. Both symmetrical and asymmetrical outcomes had the potential to be successful in terms of emotion regulation, depending on the valence of the worker's emotional state as well as the nature and context of the coworker interactions. Overall, workers approached the social sharing of workplace emotion with caution, especially in regard to positive emotions, for fear of feeling worse and not better from their disclosures. Yet, despite the inherent risks involved in discussing positive and negative events with colleagues, this study makes clear that *workers are doing it anyway.* As one participant declared, 'Talking with other coworkers at work is the only way to truly process the emotions of work.' This investigation has shed new light on the complexity – and the power – of such emotion regulation efforts as they occur in today's organizations.

Acknowledgements

I thank Harvard University for the support of this research, which is based upon my doctoral dissertation. In particular, J Richard Hackman, Teresa Amabile, Amy Edmondson, Joshua Margolis, Erin Lehman, Anita Woolley, Andy Molinsky, Amy Sommer, Erin McFee, Sujin Jang, Nick Aramovich, Todd Pittinsky, and members of Groups Group, ARG, and the Quiet Group were enormously helpful in guiding the development of this research and the presentation of results. The three anonymous reviewers and Special Issue Guest Editors Peter Jordan and Dirk Lindebaum also provided essential feedback and encouragement throughout the revision process. This work is dedicated to the late J Richard Hackman, who institutionalized the process of sharing good news – even when we did not want to – in his research group.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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