

## **Chapter #10**

### **AFFECTIVE STYLES AND DIFFICULTIES IN EMOTION REGULATION**

**Sarah Lall**

*Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College (Chennai), India*

#### **ABSTRACT**

Emotion regulation refers to “the process by which people influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions”. Research studies substantiate that emotion regulation plays a pivotal role in an individual’s mental health and various aspects of daily functioning. Affective style, a closely linked construct, is a typical tendency to use some emotion regulatory strategies over others. The present study explores the relationships among affective styles (concealing, tolerating and adjusting) and specific difficulties in emotion regulation (awareness, quality, goals, impulse, non-acceptance and strategies). Self-report measures on affective style and difficulties in emotion regulation were given to a sample of 196 individuals in the 17-30 age range. Difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior, a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies, and a lack of clarity in emotional experiences emerged as significant predictors of impulse control difficulties. An adjusting affective style was found to significantly predict access to emotion regulation strategies, and a tolerating affective style was negatively correlated with a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies, and a lack of clarity in emotions. The findings of the study have important implications in understanding psychopathology, as well as in planning intervention for vulnerable populations.

*Keywords:* emotion regulation, affective style, impulse control.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

##### **1.1. Emotion regulation**

Emotion regulation is an area that has garnered tremendous interest among psychological researchers in the last few decades. Emotion regulation refers to “the process by which people influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 5). Several studies substantiate that emotion regulation is linked to a variety of aspects of one’s daily functioning. For instance, a diverse use of emotion regulation strategies has been found to be beneficial to one’s overall life satisfaction and wellbeing (Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010). Consequently, it is an essential component contributing to satisfaction in marital relationships (Bloch, Haase & Levenson, 2014). Emotion regulation has been linked to employee stress and health as well as organizational wellbeing (Grandey, 2000). It is an important aspect of social adjustment and prosocial behavior in adults (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000) as well as in children, where it was found that the way in which children handle their emotions plays a crucial role in their social competence (Denham et.al., 2003). While emotion regulation plays an extremely important role in mental health, emotion dysregulation has been implicated in several forms of psychopathology such as

personality disorders, schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety, phobias, eating disorders, as well as autism, ADHD and intermittent explosive disorder in children (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014).

An individual may use various strategies to modify how they experience emotions. These strategies also help to alter the course of emotion in terms of when and how they are expressed. Gross & John (2003) describe two commonly used emotion regulation strategies - cognitive reappraisal and suppression of emotional expression. Cognitive reappraisal is when one alters the way they think about a situation in order to minimize their unpleasant emotions or maximize positive emotional aspects. It is a deliberate process, and often occurs before the distress is fully experienced. For instance, before a big performance, a musician might focus on his skills and the thoroughness of his practice, rather than thinking about possibly being negatively evaluated by his audience. Cognitive appraisal may also occur after a distressing situation, where for instance, an individual who just failed a test would choose to think about it as a learning opportunity rather than put himself down as a failure. On the other hand, suppression of expression is when an emotional response has already occurred while the individual inhibits its expression. For instance, not showing anger after experiencing an incident of injustice, even though one is feeling very angry.

While Gross and John (2003) provided a broad conceptual framework of emotion regulation, Gratz and Roemer (2004) conceptualize emotion regulation as involving specific processes such as the (a) awareness and understanding of emotions, (b) acceptance of emotions, (c) ability to control impulsive behaviors and act in line with desired goals when experiencing negative emotions, and (d) ability to use situationally appropriate emotion regulation strategies in a flexible way, in order to meet individual goals and situational demands. Gratz and Roemer (2004) point out that problems in one or more of these areas would indicate difficulties in emotion regulation.

A comprehensive understanding of these difficulties was provided by Kaufman et al., (2016), who outlined six constructs of difficulties in emotion regulation - (a) *non-acceptance of emotional responses* reflects a tendency toward denial of distress, (b) *difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior* involves problems focusing on and accomplishing tasks while experiencing negative emotions, (c) *impulse control difficulties* reflects struggles to control behavior when upset, (d) *lack of emotional awareness* involves inattention to emotional responses, (e) *limited access to emotion regulation strategies* assesses beliefs that there is little a person can do to regulate one's emotions effectively while upset, and (f) *lack of emotional clarity* reflects the extent to which individuals experience ambiguity about which emotions they are experiencing.

## 1.2. Affective style

Emotion regulation is closely linked to 'affective style', a typical tendency each individual displays, to use some emotion regulatory strategies over others. In essence, it is an inter - individual difference variable that refers to sensitivity to emotion, as well as tendencies for regulating emotions. Affective style may also be described as an emotional vulnerability owing to individual differences in one's temperament, personality and vulnerability to psychopathology (Davidson, 1998). Research on the behavioral and neurological underpinnings of emotion reveals that affective style is indeed a trait-like difference in the speed and intensity of emotional and behavioral responses to rewards or threats (Dennis, 2007). Some affective styles are beneficial in regulating the experience and expression of emotions in healthy ways that enhance the attainment of goals, whereas other strategies seem to have counterproductive effects. Based on consistent pointers in the emotion literature, Hofmann & Kashdan (2010) developed a conceptual model for affective

styles, consisting of three factors – concealing, tolerating and adjusting affective styles. Similar to Gross and John's (2003) 'suppression of emotional expression', the *concealing affective style* involves concealing and avoiding emotions when they occur. On the other hand, the *adjusting affective style* involves being able to use emotion related cues or information to balance how one feels, adapt to the context and solve problems effectively. Finally, the *tolerating affective style* reflects an ability to accept and endure emotional upheavals without resisting or suppressing them.

Research studies in this context show that attempts to suppress or conceal emotions increase physiological arousal (Gross, 1998), and rumination over negative emotional events prolongs the duration of angry and depressed affective states (Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). On the other hand, when individuals tend to accept emotional experiences without attempting to change or avoid them, they consequently show higher persistence in challenging situations and lower subjective distress (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006).

### **1.3. Emotion regulation and affective style: how they work together**

The emotion regulation literature incorporating affective styles is minimal. However, existing research suggests that greater emotional awareness is associated with greater self-reported impulse control. Individual differences in emotional awareness have also been found to predict recovery of positive mood and lessening of ruminative thoughts following a distressing stimulus (Salovey, Mayer, Golman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). Research also indicates that there is a strong human tendency to avoid painful emotions. From the experiential perspective, approach and tolerance of emotional experience is necessary, however, optimum emotional processing can only happen when there is an integration of cognition and affect (Greenberg, 2002), where it is ideally explored, reflected on, and made sense of. (Greenberg, 2004). Hofmann, Sawyer, Fang & Asnaani (2012) integrate affective styles with emotional regulation to propose a model of depressive and anxiety disorders. They point out that affective style is a function of both external and internal triggers, including the individual's biological / psychological vulnerabilities. One's affective style largely determines the experience of negative or positive affect. Certain affective styles predispose the individual to experiencing sustained negative affect, which may contribute to psychopathology. Their approach to treatment includes (a) promoting healthy emotion regulation strategies, including becoming more aware of emotional experiences, (b) decreasing negative affect and increasing positive affect by promoting adaptive affective styles, (c) experiencing a whole range of emotions, while preventing a pattern of concealing or avoidance, (d) developing the ability to tolerate distressing emotions, and (e) using emotion as important information in a given situation.

Emotion regulation and affective styles have rarely been studied together, and the present study will throw light on the nature of the relationship between the two, as well as determine whether specific affective styles predispose one to emotion regulation difficulties. Existing research studies examine emotional dysregulation in broad terms in the clinical context, but few focus on the specific types of emotional dysregulation. Exploring these aspects can have important implications in understanding psychopathology, as well as planning intervention. Furthermore, this study will enrich the current understanding of emotion regulation in the Indian context, especially in the light of lack of research in this area.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study addresses gaps in the literature by investigating the relationships among affective styles and specific difficulties in emotion regulation. The study aims to –

- Determine the relationships between three affective styles (concealing, tolerating and adjusting) and difficulties in emotion regulation (awareness, clarity, goals, impulse, non-acceptance and strategies).

- Determine whether affective styles can predict difficulties in emotion regulation.

- Determine whether there are significant gender differences in affective styles and difficulties in emotion regulation.

## 3. METHOD

Two self-report measures – The Affective Style Questionnaire (Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010) and The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale - Short Form (DERS-SF – Kaufman et.al, 2016) were given to a sample of 196 individuals (91 males and 105 females), in the 17-30 age range, with a mean age of 22.64 years (SD = 3.26), in the city of Chennai, South India. A convenience sampling method was followed.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Affective styles

Analyses to identify the correlates of a concealing affective style (Table 1) indicate a negative correlation with a lack of emotional awareness ( $r = -.171, p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that individuals with this particular style are more aware that they are experiencing unpleasant emotions, however prefer to conceal rather than actively work towards processing these emotions.

The tolerating affective style showed significant negative correlations with a lack of clarity in emotions ( $r = -.306, p < 0.001$ ), non-acceptance of emotional responses ( $r = -.321, p < 0.01$ ), and a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies ( $r = -.208, p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that apart from having a higher awareness and acceptance of emotional responses, individuals with this style also are aware of how to regulate these emotions. However, unlike people with an adjusting affective style, this style shows no significant correlations with the ability to engage in goal directed behavior. Linear regression analysis showed that a tolerating affective style significantly predicts clarity of emotional experiences, explaining 9.3% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.093, F(1, 194) = 20, p < 0.001$ ).

An adjusting affective style showed significant negative correlations with a lack of clarity in emotions ( $r = -.252, p < 0.001$ ), impulse control difficulties ( $r = -.315, p < 0.001$ ), difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior ( $r = -.357, p < 0.001$ ), non-acceptance of emotional responses ( $r = -.301, p < 0.01$ ) and a poor access to emotion regulation strategies ( $r = -.516, p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that individuals who are able to use emotion related information to lend greater balance and adapt to the emotional context not only have greater clarity and acceptance of emotional experiences, but are also able to use emotion regulation strategies with greater ease, engage effectively in goal directed behavior, and have a lower likelihood of having impulse control problems. Further, regression analysis revealed that an adjusting affective style significantly predicts and accounts for 26.6% of the variability in access to emotion regulatory strategies ( $R^2 = .266, F = 70.582, (1, 195), p < 0.001$ ).

*Table 1.*  
*Correlations between affective styles and difficulties in emotion regulation.*

	Lack of awareness	Lack of clarity	Difficulty in goal directed behavior	Impulse control difficulty	Non-acceptance of emotional responses	Limited access to regulation strategies
Concealing Affective Style	-0.171*	0.11	0.011	0.006	0.064	0.126
Tolerating Affective Style	0.240**	-0.306**	-0.115	-0.117	-0.321**	-0.218**
Adjusting Affective Style	0.097	-0.252**	-0.357**	-0.315**	-0.301**	-0.516**

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

#### **4.2. Difficulties in emotion regulation**

The study also attempted to explore the relationships between the various difficulties in emotion regulation, and identify whether problems in emotional experiences such as a lack of awareness or clarity can predict difficulties in the regulatory process itself. Results indicate that most difficulties in emotion regulation are significantly inter-related (Table 2), however, one particular variable – impulse control difficulties – seemed to significantly correlate with most other difficulties in emotion regulation. For instance, positive correlations emerged between impulse control difficulties and a lack of clarity of emotional experiences ( $r = .401$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), non-acceptance of emotional responses ( $r = .472$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), lack of access to regulatory strategies ( $r = .611$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior ( $r = .623$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Table 2.*  
*Inter-correlations between difficulties in emotion regulation.*

	Lack of awareness	Lack of clarity	Difficulty in goal directed behavior	Impulse control difficulty	Non-acceptance of emotional responses	Limited access to regulation strategies
Lack of awareness		-0.301**	0.056	-0.076	-0.048	-0.072
Lack of clarity			0.307**	0.401**	0.538**	0.407**
Difficulty in goal directed behavior				0.623**	0.474**	0.580**
Impulse control difficulty					0.472**	0.611**
Non-acceptance of emotional responses						0.546**
Limited access to regulation strategies						

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

A further step-wise regression analysis (Table 3) showed that difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior, lack of access to regulatory strategies, and a lack of clarity in emotional experiences are significant predictors of impulse control difficulties ( $R^2 = 0.50$ ), with problems engaging in goal directed activity accounting for 38.8% of the variance, problems engaging in goal directed activity and lack of access to regulatory strategies cumulatively accounting for 48.3% of the variance, and problems engaging in goal directed activity, lack of access to regulatory strategies, and lack of clarity in emotional experiences cumulatively accounting for 50.2% of the variance in impulse control difficulties.

*Table 3.*  
*Step-wise regression model summary – predictors of impulse control difficulties.*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.623 <sup>a</sup>	.388	.385		2.12811
2	.695 <sup>b</sup>	.483	.478		1.96132
3	.709 <sup>c</sup>	.502	.494		1.92966

Dependent Variable: Impulse control difficulties

a. Predictors: (Constant), Difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour

b. Predictors: (Constant), Difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour, Lack of access to regulatory strategies

c. Predictors: (Constant), Difficulties engaging in goal directed behaviour, Lack of access to regulatory strategies, Lack of clarity in emotions

These results have important implications in understanding growing problems in young adults such as unhealthy impulsive eating, the abuse of substances, and self-harm behaviors. Schreiber, Grant, and Odlaug (2012) demonstrated a clear link between emotion regulation and impulsivity in the context of addictions. The study on 194 young adults found that those with greater emotion dysregulation scored significantly higher on self-report measures of impulsivity. Overall, their study suggested that emotion regulation may be an important factor to consider when assessing individuals at a higher risk for developing an addiction. In another unique study, Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister (2001) demonstrated how under everyday circumstances in which moods and emotional states can be changed, emotional distress made people increase their intake of unhealthy snacks. However, this pattern was reversed when people were told that their moods would remain frozen, and not change during the experiment. This simple manipulation eliminated participants' tendency to consume more food as a response to emotional distress. These findings suggest that people typically respond to distress by eating more fattening, unhealthy foods because they expect to feel better after their impulsive eating. Findings of the current study imply that a lack of clarity in emotional experiences, a lack of access to regulatory strategies, as well as difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior could all be contributors to the general understanding of 'emotional distress', which leads people to indulge in impulsive behaviors.

### 4.3. Gender differences

T-tests to assess gender differences in affective styles (Table 4) revealed that males have significantly better scores on the adjusting affective style ( $t = 2.008$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). A study by McRae, Ochsner, Mauss, Gabrieli, and Gross (2008) lending support to this finding showed that although, neurally, men and women showed equal responsiveness to emotionally upsetting stimuli, men showed greater down-regulation of negative feelings

than women. A possible explanation offered by the authors is that men are capable of using regulation, especially strategies such as cognitive reappraisal with lesser effort than women, requiring less engagement of the prefrontal structures usually implicated in the strategic process of cognitive and emotional control. Secondly, they point out that women may be indulging in the dual process of up-regulating positive emotion while attempting to downregulate negative emotion to a greater extent than men. In the context of the current study, this suggests that although men may have a more adjusting affective style towards upsetting events and are better at decreasing upsetting emotions, women may be more adept at increasing their positive emotions in an upsetting situation. Also, owing to the male gender role of being more action-oriented, they may also be more likely than women to adjust faster in order to engage in problem-solving in attempts to control or change the situation.

*Table 4.*  
*Gender differences in affective styles.*

	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
Adjusting affective style	Male	91	24.2747	6.38412	2.0*
	Female	106	22.6132	5.22917	

\* Significant at the 0.05 level

In addition, an exploration of gender differences in difficulties in emotion regulation revealed significant differences in a lack of emotional awareness ( $t = -2.839$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ), with women displaying a greater lack of emotional awareness (Table 5). How can this be interpreted, especially in the light of research evidence suggesting that women pay more attention to their feelings? Evidence from three studies will be discussed to throw light on these findings. Firstly, Salovey et.al. (1995) point out that individual differences in emotional awareness predicted recovery of positive mood and lessening of ruminative thoughts. This means that the more one is emotionally unaware, the more they tend to ruminate over their feelings. Secondly, in the context of gender differences, Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) demonstrated that women tend to ruminate, much more than men, while men have a greater tendency to use alcohol to cope with upsetting events. Thirdly, in their study which looked into automatic vs. deliberate regulation of emotions, McRae et.al. (2008), used an adaptation of the emotion regulation implicit attitudes task (ER-IAT) (Mauss, Evers, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2006), to assess the degree to which individuals implicitly evaluate emotion regulation in a positive way. Results revealed that men have more positive implicit attitudes toward emotion regulation than women, meaning that they show greater use of automatic emotion regulation when faced with affective stimuli. Tying these results together, it can be assumed that women have a tendency to ruminate due to comparatively lower emotional awareness, allocating greater cognitive effort to make sense of their feelings, while the process of emotion regulation is less effortful and more automatic in men. Also possibly substantiating these findings is a study by Croyle & Waltz (2002) which examined emotional awareness in couples' relationships indicated that women are more emotionally aware than men in response specifically to couples' situations, but not in response to general situations outside the

relationship. This may imply that emotional awareness in women may be more situationally dependent rather than being a more stable characteristic. In any case, gender differences in emotional awareness will require further exploration, considering that the findings of this study counter much of the prevailing literature.

*Table 5.*  
*Gender differences in difficulties in emotion regulation.*

	Sex	N	Std.		t
			Mean	Deviation	
Lack of awareness of emotional experiences	Male	91	10.0330	2.95691	-2.839**
	Female	107	11.1402	2.53075	

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level

Step-wise multiple regression analysis indicated that in men, difficulty engaging in goal directed behaviour and lack of clarity in emotional experiences were significant predictors of impulse control difficulties, explaining 51.2% of the variance (Table 6). Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior was the biggest contributor, accounting for 44.2% of the variance. In general, men are more likely than women to engage in problem-solving attempts to control or change the situation, and the results suggest that when there is a difficulty in channelizing emotional responses into goal directed behavior, the resulting distress is dealt with impulsively.

*Table 6.*  
*Step-wise regression model summary – predictors of impulse control difficulties in men.*

Model	R		Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	Sex = Male	R Square		
1	.665 <sup>a</sup>	.442	.435	2.13067
2	.715 <sup>b</sup>	.512	.501	2.00375

a. Predictors: (Constant), Difficulty engaging in goal directed behaviour

b. Predictors: (Constant), Difficulty engaging in goal directed behaviour, Lack of clarity in emotional experiences

Step-wise multiple regression analysis indicated that in women, a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies, difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior and lack of awareness of emotional experiences were significant predictors of impulse control difficulties, explaining 53% of the variance (Table 7). A lack of access to emotion regulation strategies was the biggest contributor, accounting for 44.7% of the variance. In the light of previous research which points out that in general, women (a) pay more attention to their feelings, and (b) engage in the dual process of up-regulating positive emotions while down-regulating negative emotions, a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies or the belief that nothing can be done to change one's negative emotions, can be very distressing, leading to impulse control issues.



Table 7.  
Step-wise regression model summary – predictors of impulse control difficulties in women.

Model	R			Std. Error of the Estimate
	Sex = Female	R Square	Adjusted R Square	
1	.668 <sup>a</sup>	.447	.442	1.94719
2	.714 <sup>b</sup>	.510	.501	1.84077
3	.728 <sup>c</sup>	.530	.516	1.81280

a. Predictors: (Constant), Lack of access to emotion regulation strategies

b. Predictors: (Constant), Lack of access to emotion regulation strategies, Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior

c. Predictors: (Constant), Lack of access to emotion regulation strategies, Difficulty engaging in goal directed behaviour, Lack of awareness

One's sociocultural background is also likely to play a very important role in these gender differences, which will need to be studied more in-depth. No other significant gender differences were found with regard to affective styles or difficulties in emotion regulation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The current study demonstrates that individuals who typically adopt an adjusting affective style not only have greater clarity in emotional experiences, but are also likely to use emotion regulation strategies with greater ease, engage effectively in goal directed behavior, and have a lower likelihood of having impulse control problems. Moreover, an adjusting affective style significantly predicts one's access to emotion regulatory strategies. In comparison, those who tend to adopt a tolerating affective style have greater clarity of emotion and are likely to use emotion regulatory strategies effectively.

Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior, lack of access to regulatory strategies, and a lack of clarity in emotional experiences emerged as significant predictors of impulse control difficulties, accounting for 50% of the variability. This has tremendous implications not just in understanding pathological conditions involving impulse control difficulties such as substance abuse, binge eating and self-harm, but also in understanding sub-clinical tendencies that may be present in the general population, especially in teenagers and young adults who are reporting a growing number of problems related to unhealthy eating, substance use, sexual indiscretions and other high-risk behaviors which may be a result of a lack of impulse control stemming from basic problems in emotion regulation. This finding also implies that interventions focusing on improving emotion regulatory processes in these vulnerable populations can be developed and implemented in psychotherapy, as well as in larger-scale prevention based initiatives with young adults.

It is widely believed that men and women differ in how they regulate their emotions. The current study found that women seem to have significantly more difficulties in awareness of emotions, and men have a significantly greater adjusting affective style as compared to women. Therapeutic implications in this area can focus on exploring strategies

that enable women to achieve greater insight into their emotional experiences in healthier ways rather than indulge in rumination, especially since they prefer to engage in more effortful regulation as compared to men. Furthermore, the current study suggests that impulse control problems are determined by very different variables in men and in women, the biggest contributor in men being difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior. In comparison, women with impulse control issues have a lack of access to emotion regulation strategies. This highlights the need in the therapeutic context, for clinicians to address impulse control issues within the framework of gender. This can translate into gender-specific interventions for impulse-control problems, such as enhancing problem-focused strategies in men, and challenging implicitly held beliefs (such as ‘there is little a person can do to regulate one’s emotions effectively when upset’) in women, while improving their sense of self-efficacy in this area. Empirical studies on gender differences in emotion regulation have been mixed, and further research is required, especially in the cultural context. A majority of research has been carried out in Western individualistic cultures, however, there is a need for research in collectivistic cultures like India, assuming that emotional processing is partly a function of gender roles determined by sociocultural influences.

Given the preliminary nature of this study in Chennai, South India, replication of the results with larger samples with greater geographical representation is necessary to ensure the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

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## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Full name:** Sarah Sruti Lall

**Institutional affiliation:** Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai

**Institutional address:** Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, College Road, Nungambakkam, Chennai 600006

**Email address:** lallsarah@gmail.com

**Short biographical sketch:** Sarah is a Clinical Psychologist based in Chennai, India. Her work involves teaching, consultancy and research. She is primarily interested in the area of emotion regulation and is currently working towards developing a comprehensive measure of emotional experiences and regulatory processes in the Indian context.