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Interdependence of Blurred Roles and Social Goals in Social Emotion Regulation: Theoretical Primer and Methodological Suggestions

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Abstract

The study of how people regulate one another's emotions has grown in recent years. Known variously as interpersonal emotion regulation and social emotion regulation, researchers in affective science have begun to develop theoretical models of and a diverse set of methodologies to study this phenomena. However, two aspects of the phenomena remain underspecified: a) target and regulator roles are often blurred and variable and b) the goal dynamics that guide social emotion regulation are social in nature – tenets that have been historically discussed in relationship science and developmental science. Here, we review relevant literature from affective, social, and developmental sciences to highlight underexplored questions related to fluctuating roles in social emotion regulation and heterogeneous and interdependent (often social) goals that meaningfully impact social emotion regulation in everyday life. Then, we provide brief methodological suggestions that illustrate new analytic approaches that can be utilized to help understand roles and goals better in social emotion regulation. By paying attention to both variable roles and the social nature of goals, we can build better models of social emotion regulation that are inclusive of the heterogeneous situations, while also adopting rigorous analytical methods that respect the social nature of SER and broaden our temporal resolution to examine the interplay of roles and goals across the lifespan.

Keywords: Social emotion regulation, roles, goals, dyadic methods, close relationships

The study of how people regulate one another's emotions has steadily grown. Variously known as interpersonal emotion regulation and/or social emotion regulation (SER), in the past decade, multiple theoretical papers (Butler & Randall, 2013; Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015; Hofmann et al., 2016; Niven, 2017; Reeck et al., 2016; Zaki & Williams, 2013), empirical studies (Liu et al., 2021; MacCann et al., 2025; Matthews et al., 2022; Pauw et al., 2018; Rauers & Riediger, 2023; Sahi et al., 2021, 2023; Tran et al., 2023), and lively conference symposiums (Society for Affective Science, 2024, 2025) have been devoted to this topic.

However, at least two limitations are apparent in extant work. First, to date, SER research has been primarily rooted in affective science approaches to understanding the emotional goals that motivate, and the strategies used to, change emotions. However, the scope of phenomena that involve social emotion regulation (SER) is quite broad – involving differing numbers of people (e.g. dyads/groups), relationship types (i.e. close, professional or clinical relationships), and crossing multiple developmental stages (e.g. from children to older adults). As such, SER research may benefit from cross-talk with allied subfields interested in the entire range of phenomena. Notably, there is growing recognition that SER interactions may involve behaviors and processes that – while often overlooked in extant SER work – have long been studied in adjacent subfields of research (Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2025). Second, the very breadth of SER phenomena belies the complexity of its underlying mechanisms. Even if researchers acknowledge the principled value of interdisciplinary approaches for addressing this complexity, pragmatically, it isn't always clear what methods and analytic approaches could be used to do so.

Here, we address these limitations by a) briefly discussing two understudied aspects of SER: the facts that roles are often blurred within regulatory interactions and that social – and not just emotional – goals may guide them, and b) offering detailed suggestions for methodological and analytic practices researchers can adopt to unpack the complex contributions of these variables. Towards these ends, this paper seeks to bridge the ways regulatory roles and goals have been discussed in affective science and relationship science as well as in developmental and motivation science. Our goals are to encourage researchers to embrace the complexity of SER and give examples of some tools that can be used to deconstruct it.

Blurred Roles in Social Regulatory Interactions

In affective science, theoretical models posit that there are two roles to be played in any social emotion regulation interaction: the target – the individual experiencing emotions (frequently negative) and the regulator – the individual responding to the targets' negative emotions (Reeck et al., 2016). Cases where these roles are clear certainly exist: a parent soothes a distressed child, we listen empathically to our romantic partner's disclosure of work stressors (e.g. Repetti & Wood, 1997, Bolger et al., 2000), and an activist can upregulate anger in others to motivate social and political change (Ford et al., 2019). In all cases, at least one individual experiences distress and at least one other individual attempts to help them change or maintain their emotional response(s). However, the limitations of rigid role definitions becomes apparent when

we consider a) heterogeneous situations where individuals' emotional responses are highly interdependent, such as in close relationships and b) situate SER within the full developmental lifespan. Addressing such issues has important implications for how we study SER and model underlying processes. Here, we propose that roles can vary both between and within situations and relationships, giving rise to four kinds of blurred roles: (a) within-situation and within-relationships (Fig 2, Panel A); (b) between-situation and within-relationships (Fig 2, Panel B); (c) between-relationships and within-situations (Fig 2, Panel C); (d) between-situations and between-relationships (Fig 2, Panel D). We describe examples for each category below.

Roles vary within-situations, within-relationships.

There are many everyday instances of social emotion regulation that do not have clear-cut, fixed roles as a regulator vs. target. Consider a case where a student discloses an academic struggle to a friend (**Figure 2A)**. What begins as one person's "problem" can evolve into mutual sharing of difficulties at school, where both individuals take turns sharing an academic challenge they are grappling with vs. offering solutions and/or comforting each other. Furthermore, the close relationships literature suggests that shared experiences abound, such as a romantic couple making shared decisions about finances (e.g. dyadic coping, Falconier & Kuhn, 2019), or couples capitalizing on each other's good news (Gable et al., 2006). Role fluctuations are likely consequential for downstream outcomes, as suggested by preliminary work showing that co-rumination about shared stressors is associated with more negative affect and less closeness than when co-ruminating about a partners' stressors (Merwin et al., preprint).

Roles vary between-situations, within-relationships.

Now consider situations where – within a given relationship – individuals do not stably operate in a target or regulator role. For example, a husband may cook for his wife to alleviate stress during a busy work week, acting as a regulator in this situation. In another situation, he may operate as a target of regulation, disclosing to his wife a problem he is having with his friend, who then offers social reappraisals of his emotions (see **Figure 2B**). Such reciprocity or support exchange is linked to better relationship quality and well-being (Ryon et al., 2018; Gleason et al., 2003). Relationships research suggests that such role fluctuations are common (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2018; Rafaeli et al., 2009), and future research may unpack how the relative balance (or lack thereof) of roles across situations within a relationship relates to both intra- and interpersonal outcomes.

Roles vary within-situations, between-relationships.

Role fluctuations within-situations and between-relationships may be best exemplified in a group setting. Consider a three-person family unit: father, mother, and an adolescent struggling with an eating disorder. The parents may tag-team as regulators for the adolescent by planning meals and encouraging adherence to meal plans despite distress; however, during the conversation the parents also may alternate as targets and regulators for each other as they step in whenever one partner notices that the other is becoming frustrated or exhausted. Indeed, the clinical literature suggests that family-based treatments are thus far the most effective interventions available for adolescents with eating disorders, suggesting that ways in

which roles may alternate between people and within a situation uniquely maximize outcomes in certain contexts (Couterier et al., 2013).

Roles vary between-situations, between-relationships.
Role variation between-relationships and between-situations can be illustrated by research showing shifts from a target to a regulator role as a function of development. Recent data suggests that individuals who receive sensitive care as targets in their parent-child and adolescent friendships are more likely to become effective regulators for their future romantic partners and children (Szepsenwol et al. 2025; Stern et al., 2024). The tendency to shift roles across relationships may continue in adulthood, where we may predominantly play the regulator role at work (e.g. as manager of a start-up) while predominantly playing the target role with a best friend in whom we regularly confide (Cheung et al., 2015).

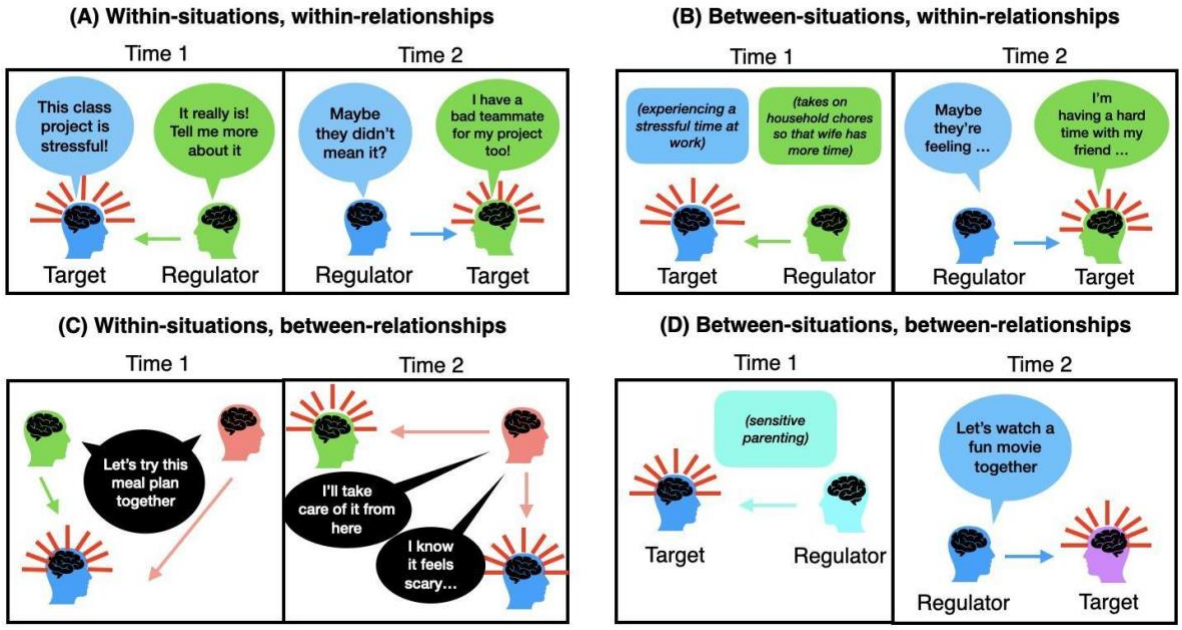

Figure 2. Examples of ways that target/regulator roles can vary as a function of social situations and relationships for both dyads and groups. Roles can fluctuate **(A)** within situations and relationships, such as when peers commiserate about a group project at school; **(B)** between situations and within relationships, such as when a romantic couple "take turns" regulating each other's emotions about their individual stressors; **(C)** within situations and between relationships, such as when parents jointly encourage their distressed child suffering from an eating disorder to adhere to a meal plan, while the parents tag-team whenever one of them feels fatigued; **(D)** between relationships and between situations, such as when an individual receives sensitive caregiving in childhood and provides empathic support to their romantic partner as an adult.

The possibility that the roles we take on in social regulatory interactions can vary in the four ways described above raises both theoretical and methodological questions. At a minimum, it

means that the ways we study and model social emotion regulation in individuals, dyads, and groups should take into account the fact that at any given moment in time, any person could occupy both target and regulator roles or shift between them, with concomitant shifts in emotional experience, expression, and attempts at regulation. We also may consider the utility of adopting from allied literatures other ways of operationalizing roles (e.g. social identities; Lakey & Orehek, 2011; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, 2017) and adjusting the temporal resolution over which we study roles (i.e. seconds, days, to years). Before turning to methodological considerations for studying varying roles, we next discuss how social goals and outcomes can be better integrated into research on social emotion regulation.

Social goals and social emotion regulation

From a theoretical perspective, all instances of emotion regulation are thought to be guided by internal goals specifying desired end states that individuals strive towards. To the extent that one's current state differs from the goal state, this discrepancy can be reduced through the implementation of various emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2015; Ochsner & Gross, 2015; Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1987). To date, emotion goals that specify desired emotional states (e.g., decreased negative affect) have received the most attention in both self-regulation (Tamir et al., 2020; Springstein & English, 2024) and social regulation research (Greenaway et al., 2021; Mauss & Tamir, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2024).

Although emotion goals are important to understand, research from the field of motivation science (e.g. Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Gable & Berkman, 2008; Elliot et al., 2006) suggests that taking a broader view of goals and associated motives may be important. We argue that if goals specify end-states that can represent a range of future outcomes and events, then goals may also represent desired *social*, not just emotional, outcomes.

In the rest of this section, we argue that social goals – a type of instrumental goal (Tamir, 2016) which reflects the desire to influence social relationships –should be more heavily emphasized in *social* emotion regulation research. This call has been echoed in recent theoretical papers as well (DiGiovanni & Ochsner, 2024; Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2025). Towards this end, we briefly review prior research assessing social goals and motives in the context of emotion regulation and consider what is missing from this work. Then, we integrate research on motivation and close relationships to discuss ways in which a more thorough examination of social goals and attendant social outcomes could enrich our understanding of why social emotion regulation occurs and what makes it successful.

Extant research on social goals in emotion regulation

In recent years, broadening views of regulatory goals (Tamir, 2016) has led to an increased appreciation of social goals. However, there are two limitations to current approaches. First, although a number of social goals may be important for SER, extant research has focused

primarily on goals that involve avoiding negative consequences for the target individual, with the lionshare of studies asking how self-regulatory strategies are motivated by desires to manage impressions or avoid conflicts (e.g. Ortner et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Eldesouky & English 2023). This leads to the second limitation - most research on social goals has examined self-regulation rather than social emotion regulation. For example, English and colleagues (2017) asked how an individual's social goals and self-regulatory strategy usage differed as a function of whether individuals were with others or not (see also Wilms et al., 2020). While it is surely valuable to study how one self-regulates emotions in the presence of others, it also is important to understand how social goals shape regulatory interactions *between* two or more people. It is notable that little empirical work has examined social goals during the *social* regulation of emotion (c.f. Liu et al., 2021), although there have been numerous calls to do so (e.g., Niven, 2009; Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015; English & Growney, 2021; Springstein & English, 2024; DiGiovanni & Ochsner, 2024; Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2025).

Expanding our understanding of social goals

Multiple types of social goals. Motivation theories distinguish goals related to the prevention/avoidance of *unwanted* outcomes vs. the promotion/approach of *wanted* outcomes (Gable 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012; Higgins, 1998; Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). The two most commonly studied social goals in emotion regulation research – impression management and conflict avoidance goals – may reflect the former rather than the latter. Specifically, goals to manage impressions or avoid conflict reflect an individual's desire to avoid negative outcomes (e.g., conflict, dislike from a partner), rather than desires for affiliation (e.g., to get closer to a partner, to gain a deeper understanding of their partner's problems). When wanting to deepen a relationship with another person, individuals are seeking to fulfill relational or belongingness needs (e.g., Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; Elliot et al., 2006) that more closely approximate promotion/approach goals. To gain a deeper understanding of the *social* component of *social* emotion regulation, it will be important for SER work to focus on these positive, prosocial goals as well (**Figure 3A**).

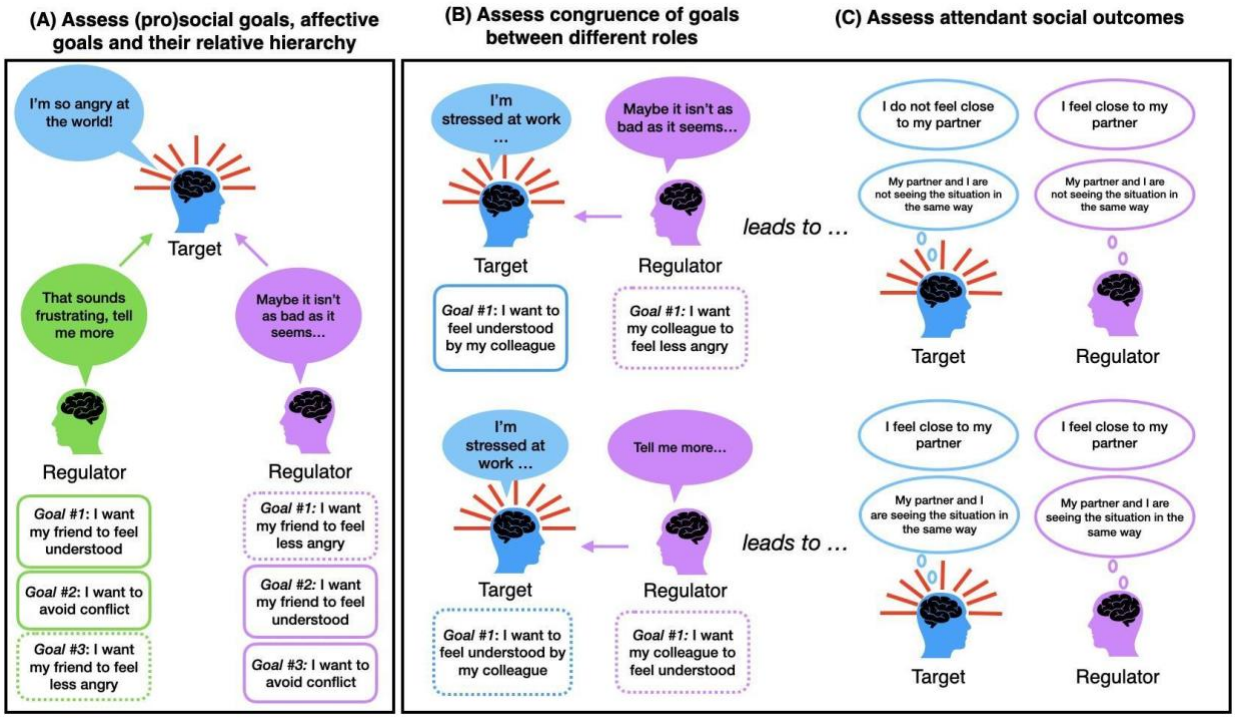

Figure 3. Understanding the contribution of social goals to social emotion regulation: **(A)** In any SER instance, individuals may possess a hierarchy of both social (e.g. goals for affiliation or to avoid rejection) and emotion goals (e.g. to feel better or maintain affect); **(B)** SER involves both target(s) and regulator(s), which necessitates measuring the congruence between their goals. For example, regulators may prioritize affective goals while targets may prioritize social goals. **(C)** Measuring social outcomes is one way of assessing whether (social) goals are met, though social outcomes can and should be assessed even in the absence of measuring social goals. Examples of social outcomes include closeness, shared reality, perceived partner responsiveness, gratitude, feelings of belongingness, relationship satisfaction and physical/emotional intimacy. Emotion goals are indicated by dotted lines while social goals are indicated by bold lines.

The importance of *pro*social goals is beginning to be examined in the context of the self-regulation of emotion. For example, some work has shown that relationship-enhancing prosocial goals as opposed to avoidance-oriented social goals are associated with the use of different self-regulation strategies (Eldesouky & English, 2019). Although prosocial goals have yet to be a significant focus in SER work, there are emerging hints as to their importance. For example, recent work showed that prosocial goals (e.g., to build or maintain relationships) were rated as the primary reason individuals engaged in social emotion regulation in daily life (Tran et al., 2023; Springstein et al., 2023).

If SER may be guided by multiple types of both social and emotional goals (Tran et al., 2023), then at any given moment, we may need to prioritize some goals over others, thereby creating a goal hierarchy (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Mauss & Tamir; 2014; Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015;

Tamir, 2016) (**Figure 3A**). The goal(s) deemed most important (e.g. a superordinate or higher order goal) will inform the SER process – starting with deciding whether to regulate and subsequently influencing strategy selection (Reeck et al, 2016). For example, consider a case where a regulator wants to decrease the anger felt by their partner, but also wants to ensure their partner feels their problems and emotions are being validated and understood. If the regulator prioritizes their partner feeling validated and heard (a prosocial goal), they may avoid using strategies that could be perceived as invalidating. Such goal hierarchies may change across the lifespan as predicted by socioemotional selectivity theory (Cartensen, 2003), which has implications for how and why individuals receive and provide social regulatory support.

Different goals for different roles. To date, it is rare for the goals of *all* individuals involved in the SER process to be considered. This seems attributable, at least in part, to most SER studies assessing the beliefs and/or behaviors of single individuals, rather than both members of a dyad or all members of a larger group. This is unfortunate, given that targets and regulators may be pursuing different goals (e.g. Zaki, 2020). For instance, we might hypothesize that a relatively small set of emotion goals (e.g., down-regulating negative affect) are salient to regulators, whereas targets might possess a more complex set of goals (Kruglanski et al., 2015), including wanting to feel better while also wanting to be understood, validated, and feel connected. Moreover, as has been delineated by the theory of transactive goal dynamics in the context of close relationships, the relative congruence (or fit) of individuals' respective goals may influence the behaviors and outcomes for each person (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015; Wegner, 1987). In the example provided above where regulators and targets possess different goals, transactive goal dynamics would predict that misalignment between the goals of those involved would have downstream consequences for SER (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018). As such, to fully understand when and why SER is more versus less successful, we must assess the goals of all individuals involved and the extent to which they have goals that are congruent or conflicting (**Figure 3B**).

This approach is aligned with prior work emphasizing that social and affective processes in close relationships should be viewed as coordinated and interdependent (Butler & Randall, 2013; Butler, 2015, 2017). For example, we can imagine a case where Ruth discloses a recent stressful work experience to her friend and co-worker Jared, who happens to hold a higher position in their company. Ruth wants to feel validated and understood by Jared (a prosocial goal), but also wants to feel less stressed about the situation (an emotion goal). Jared doesn't want Ruth to be troubled (an emotion goal), so he offers social reappraisals of her situation that are intended to help her view events in a more positive light. Ruth sees Jared's attempts to make her feel better – through painting a more positive picture of the situation – as invalidating her experience of the situation as stressful. Yet, because she is in a subordinate position to Jared, Ruth wants to avoid conflict (a social goal). She therefore prioritizes the avoidant social goal over her affective and prosocial goals, and chooses to self-regulate by suppressing the expression of her hurt feelings.

Taken together, the dyadic and group examples above highlight the complex ways in which goals may shape social emotion regulation, including that fact that each person's regulatory

goals may not always be met, how the use of self-regulation may be intertwined with instances of social regulation, and how goal attainment may be contingent upon strategy selection.

Assessing social goals means assessing social outcomes. In the prior sections on goals we have argued it is important to explore and explicate the expressly social goals that can guide emotion regulation in relational contexts. Here we highlight that determining whether these goals have been attained requires assessing various kinds of social outcomes that may result from the SER process (**Figure 3C**). Alongside affective outcomes, SER research could take cues from work in the field of close relationships, assessing social outcomes like feelings of closeness, physical and emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, feelings of belongingness or support, shared reality, perceived partner responsiveness, and gratitude (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; Gleason et al., 2008; Girme et al., 2013; DiGiovanni et al., 2021; Algoe, 2012; Reis et al., 2004). Additional outcomes may be of interest when studying SER in group contexts, specifically. For example, studies could follow research on intergroup relations and measure social outcomes such as group cohesion (Forsyth, 2021), ingroup identity (Dovidio et al., 2008), satisfaction with coworkers (Simon et al., 2010), and altruism (Feigin et al., 2014).

Some empirical work on SER within dyads has started moving in this direction by studying social outcomes associated with SER. For example, a recent paper showed that multiple different social emotion regulation strategies were associated with improved mood when targets perceived their partner as being caring and responsive to their needs (i.e., high perceived partner responsiveness; Jurkiewicz et al., 2023). Although there may be cases where specific social regulatory strategies are most appropriate for specific emotions (Shu et al, 2021), this work suggests that over and above the specific strategy used, whether that strategy is perceived to be an act of care and validation is critically important. This highlights the potential interdependence of affective and social goals and outcomes during the SER process.

Methodological and Analytic Approaches to Studying Roles and Goals during Social Emotion Regulation

Given that target and regulator roles may be blurred in many SER interactions, and that individuals may have multiple social and emotional goals guiding their behavior, it may be useful to offer some practical guidance with respect to methodological and data analytic approaches suited to capturing these complexities – and their implications for relationships and well-being – in a feasible manner.

From a study design perspective, we can highlight different ways that the time-varying and interdependent nature of goals and roles can be examined in future studies. First, researchers can continue using intensive repeated-measures designs of daily life experiences to examine within-person fluctuations in roles and goals over time (e.g. days to years). Second, role and

goal fluctuations can also be examined within a given interaction in the lab. For example, coders could rate the extent to which a given conversation partner was in the regulator or target role during a chosen time interval, and video playback methods can be used where participants watch their recorded interaction and rate their own regulatory goals or feelings about the interaction in 30s or 60s intervals (e.g., DiGiovanni & Peters, 2025). Third, studies could clarify the level of analysis at which roles and goals fluctuate (see Kenny, 2006; Iida et al., 2018; Overall et al., 2020; Girme et al., 2021; DiGiovanni et al., 2023). For example, is the process being examined an individual-level process between interdependent people (e.g. partner X's goals influence partner Y's goals), or is the process at a dyadic level (e.g. a shared positive relationship history might cause both partners to adopt regulator roles within a single interaction). Such analyses can be further extended to a group-level, which consists of different permutations of dyadic relationships that can either consolidate or diffuse regulatory effects (Goldenberg, 2024; Zhao & Garip, 2021). These methods can be adopted for parent-child dyads, friendship dyads, romantic partners, and coworkers.

From an analytic perspective, multilevel models can capture within-person fluctuations in roles and goals, but there are various other advanced statistical approaches (see Laurenceau et al., 2025 for new intensive longitudinal modeling approaches) that also can be applied to examine these processes within social emotion regulatory interactions. For example, studies could borrow from research on emotion regulation flexibility/variability (Aldao et al., 2015; Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Ladis et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2024). Instead of examining how regulation strategies are differentially employed depending on the context, researchers could ask how roles and goals are differentially expressed depending on context, which subsequently could be used to predict meaningful emotion and social outcomes. Similarly, variance decomposition approaches that separate out unique variance attributable to stable between dyads, between persons or within dyads/groups differences, as well variance attributable to fluctuations within dyads/groups and persons over time, may help uncover the extent to which certain dyads/groups show a more rigid signature where individuals tend towards certain roles (e.g., they have a trait-like, stable "regulator" role) or goals (e.g., certain individuals always endorse high levels of social goals), versus the extent to which this varies across contexts (DiGiovanni et al., 2023).

Other analytic methods common within relationship science may be useful as well. Actor-partner interdependence modeling (Kenny & Ledderman, 2010; Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2020) can enable the exploration of how, for example, one partner's endorsement of a social goal influences the other partners' perception of relationship quality. Dyadic response surface analysis (Schönbrodt et al., 2018) could be used to examine how relative similarities or differences in goal alignment between partners has downstream influences on the happiness of the couple or the success of social emotion regulation. Similar analyses can be done on groups with analytic approaches such as the Social Relations Model (Back & Kenny, 2010). Finally, location-scale modeling (Hedeker et al., 2008; McNeish & Hamaker 2021) enables the exploration of how a certain predictor variable influences both the mean and variance of another variable. This could be used to examine what types of between-person predictors (e.g., agreeableness and neuroticism, power dynamics, need to belong, vertical and horizontal

individualism and collectivism) influence the relative stability in roles and goals, as well as variability or volatility in these processes.

Conclusion

Social emotion regulation is a growing field with increasing cross-disciplinary interest. As such it may be useful to consider how work in this area could be both broadened and deepened and it continues to grow. Towards these ends, this paper highlighted the potential benefits of increasing the integration of concepts, methods, and analytic tools from adjacent fields of research, connecting approaches to understanding SER from affective science with approaches from relationship science.

To illustrate the benefits of such cross-field integration, we focused on the importance of understanding variability in roles and the complexity of goals during social regulatory interactions. On the roles side, we started by noting that extant social emotion regulation research has focused on situations where individuals have fixed roles as either a target experiencing emotional distress or as a regulator offering strategic support. We then highlighted that work on close relationships and lifespan development suggest that the roles are rarely fixed, and in fact often vary within and across situations and relationships. We argued that future research should acknowledge and measure role variability across situations, relationship types, and over time.

On the goals side, we discussed the prevailing emphasis on emotion goals in extant SER research, and that when social goals are studied, the focus has been on goals to avoid negative outcomes, such as rejection. Noting that relationships research also emphasizes prosocial goals, we argued that social goals to increase connection or closeness may play key roles in social emotion regulation and could be a focus for future research.

Finally, having considered myriad ways in which variable roles and multiple types of goals can introduce a high degree of complexity into SER interactions, we offered suggestions for methodological and analytic tools – often ported from relationship science research – that could be used to disentangle the ways in which specific goals, held by individuals in particular roles, shape the nature and outcomes of SER. Just as the flavor of a well-cooked stew emerges not just from each ingredient but also their interaction over time, it is imperative to study the development and fundamentally interactive nature of roles and goals as key ingredients of social emotion regulation that fluctuate over time. We have proposed an initial recipe, and we look forward to and invite researchers to join us at the table to further enrich the study of social emotion regulation.

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