Relatedness as a Resource in State Orientation

Summary

Every day people are exposed to a wide variety of emotion-eliciting stimuli. Especially negative emotional stimuli such as increased stress levels, personal failure or setbacks can undermine well-being in the short and the long run. The construct state versus action orientation describes individual differences in the ability to self-regulate emotions. Action orientation after failure describes people’s ability to effortlessly (and intuitively) downregulate negative emotions, disengage from dysfunctional ruminations, and retain the capability to act even when faced with obstacles. By contrast, state orientation after failure describes the inability to exert volitional control over aversive affective states. State-oriented individuals’ tendency to get stuck in negative affective states has been linked to a wide range of psychological impairments, such as increased tendency to rumination, mismatches between explicit goals and implicit needs, decreased levels of well-being, and the development of psychosomatic symptoms (Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005; Baumann & Kuhl, 2003; Baumann & Quirin, 2006; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994).

More than 30 years of research on state and action orientation have demonstrated the downside of low self-regulation competence (e.g., Kuhl, 1981, 2001, 2011). However, given that as much as 50% of the normal, non-clinical population in Western countries may suffer from emotional self-regulation deficits, state orientation can be considered as a common psychological condition (Koole, Kuhl, Jostmann, & Vohs, 2005). Moreover, the limited malleability of both state orientation and stressful life events, underscore the importance to examine the factors that can provide a buffer against the negative effects of their co-occurrence.

In recent years, the interaction between contextual factors and self-regulation has received increasing attention. In particular, positive social connections and relatedness (i.e., the feeling of being inseparably connected to close others) emerge as the most promising candidates to reduce the interfering effects of state orientation on well-being (Koole et al., 2005; Kuhl & Keller, 2008). The impact of experienced support and the visualization of supportive and relaxing contexts have been investigated thoroughly. So far, however, the role of relatedness has only been discussed at a theoretical level.

The present thesis sets out to empirically test the theoretical assumptions about the impact of relatedness on self-regulation abilities. The dissertation draws on current paradigms in social cognition and cross-cultural personality research, to assesses cultural contexts at the
individual level in differences between members of various cultures in their concern for relatedness to close others. Within this wide field of research, the present thesis aims at answering - more specifically - the following questions: (1) Does relatedness buffer negative effects of state orientation under stress? (2) Does a generally high evaluation of relatedness increase the chance that situational cues of relatedness are perceived as supportive among state-oriented individuals? Further, expanding the field of research to a cross-cultural field: (3) Is state orientation less disadvantageous for well-being in interdependent than in independent cultures? And, finally, (4) can state orientation indirectly affect well-being across cultures because it is associated with less satisfaction of basic social needs that, in turn, are linked to reduced subjective well-being? To address these questions, the present thesis presents five studies that are based on effects of natural and experimentally induced variations in relatedness and its relationship to self-regulation, stress, and well-being.

In Chapter 1, I provide a brief introduction to dispositional differences in self-regulation (i.e. action versus state orientation), relatedness and the current state of research on their interaction in. In Chapter 2, I present two studies addressing the question whether relatedness buffers negative effects of state orientation under stressful conditions. In each of the presented studies, this question was approached differently. The first study in Chapter 2 provides a correlational analysis of the interaction between state orientation, pro-social value orientation (expressed by personal values comprised as benevolence) as a sign of relatedness, and stressful life circumstances on well-being. The results of this study show that – compared to state-oriented participants that devaluated pro-social orientations – state-oriented participants who gave high importance to pro-social values, felt less impaired in their subjective well-being even when they reported that life circumstances were stressful. In the second study in Chapter 2, relatedness and stress were experimentally manipulated. Here, the interaction between state orientation and the two manipulated variables on changes in negative mood were measured. Taken together, the results of both studies in Chapter 2 confirm the hypothesis that under stressful conditions state-oriented individuals profit from contexts that foster relatedness.

There are individual differences in the degree people value and need socially supportive contexts (i.e. relatedness) for their personal well-being. Therefore, it is likely that not all state-oriented individuals perceive relatedness to be helpful in emotion regulation to the same extent. Based on this reasoning, I address the effects of self-regulation, values, and situational context conjointly in Chapter 3. The idea we wanted to test was whether people most in need of social support (i.e., state-oriented individuals) may not be able to perceive and utilize
supportive cues (i.e., priming for similarities with a close other) unless they value relatedness as an essential principle in their lives. The two studies presented in Chapter 3 approach the question whether a generally high evaluation of relatedness among state-oriented individuals might increase the openness to perceive situational cues of relatedness as supportive. In both studies a high pro-social value orientation as a sign of relatedness (like in Chapter 2 expressed by personal values comprised as benevolence) favored that state-oriented participants felt more secure after they had thought of similarities towards a close person, whereas they felt less secure after they had thought of differences. This increase in security among state-oriented participants with high pro-social value orientation was observed, when the other person was present (Chapter 3/Study2) as well as when participants only thought of a person important to them (Chapter 3/Study1).

An growing body of cross-cultural literature suggests that there are cultural differences in the degree relatedness is valued as a core cultural conception and in the degree self-regulatory abilities (i.e., action versus state orientation) are important for subjective well-being. In particular, some authors have proposed that in Eastern (interdependent) cultures, a higher tendency towards state orientation will be found – albeit without the impairments observed in Western (independent) cultures (Kuhl & Keller, 2008). To date, however, no published research has investigated these assumptions. In Chapter 4, I provide a short theoretical introduction to cultural developmental pathways of self-regulation and its effects in adulthood within different cultural settings. In Chapter 5, I present a first approach to investigate cultural similarities and differences in the effects of state orientation on well-being. Central to this chapter is the question whether state orientation might be less disadvantageous for well-being in Eastern than in Western cultures. In Western cultures, the link between state orientation increased frustration of basic social needs (for relatedness/affiliation, achievement, and power) and the development of psychosomatic symptoms is well established. In a similar vein, previous research in Eastern cultures has suggested that a restriction of personal needs might impair well-being across cultural boundaries. Therefore, it is conceivable that state orientation might indirectly affect well-being across cultures because it is associated with less satisfaction of basic social needs that, in turn, are linked to reduced subjective well-being. In the study presented in Chapter 5, the frustration of basic social needs mediated – at least partially – the relationship between state orientation and reduced well-being in samples from one Western (German) and two Eastern (Indian and Bangladeshi) countries. At the same time, the study revealed cultural differences in the degree to which state orientation was related to need frustration. In the German sample,
state orientation was more strongly associated with need frustration than in the Indian and Bangladeshi samples. This result is in line with the reasoning that adverse effects of state orientation decrease when state-oriented people recognize value of close relationships.

In the closing chapter, Chapter 6, I summarize the results of all the empirical studies in this theses and put them in broader perspective. In so doing, I critically discuss the contribution of knowledge to the latest state of research and the central constructs action versus state orientation and relatedness in their cross-cultural significance and their culture-specific variations. Finally, I discuss the implications of the present research for working contexts, therapy and interpersonal interactions in everyday life.