Positive and negative emotional attractors and intentional change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the process by which individual change occurs.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper presents the intentional change theory (ICT) perspective on the role of positive and negative emotion in individual level intentional change. Existing emotion research is reviewed to provide a framework for discussion.

Findings – ICT offers a new understanding on the role of positive and negative emotion in the process of intentional change. The positive emotional attractor (PEA) triggers constructive cognitive and physiological responses that enhance an individual's motivation, effort, optimism, flexibility, creative thinking, resilience and other adaptive behaviors. The negative emotional attractor (NEA) triggers another process by calling attention to current social and environmental stressors that may compromise an individual's effectiveness. While both emotional attractors play an important role in intentional change, it is critically important to leverage the beneficial effects of PEA arousal.

Practical implications – Through thorough understanding of the PEA and NEA coaching and other ways of helping adults change can be enhanced. ICT is currently used worldwide in MBA classrooms, executive education programs and executive coaching contexts. Research on the impact of positive and negative emotion in intentional change can enhance these practice applications.

Originality/value – To date, no one has conceptualized the PEA and NEA in this manner. This proposes an enhancement of the previously developed notions of the value of positive emotion and positivity.

Keywords Individual behaviour, Behaviour modification, Change management

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Emotions play a central role in intentional change. They excite our interest, focus our attention, alert us to the need for change and move us to act. Emotions also influence how we cope with challenge and threat, set new goals, learn new behavior and draw on others for help or support. In this article I address the impact of emotion on the process of intentional change. Consistent with intentional change theory (ICT) (Boyatzis, 2004a, 2001b), I propose that positive and negative emotion shape the change process through the pull of two emotional attractors, the positive emotional attractor and the negative emotional attractor (Boyatzis, 2004). ICT defines the positive emotional attractor (PEA) as the personal hopes, dreams, possibilities, strengths, optimism and self-directed learning goals that make up our Ideal Self (Boyatzis, 2004), i.e. our conception of what we most aspire to be and become (Brockner and Higgins, 2001; Waugh, 2001; Higgins *et al.*, 1994). The negative emotional attractor (NEA) is defined as the present reality, fears, problems, shortfalls, pessimism and improvement goals that constitute our real self (Boyatzis, 2004), i.e. our conception of what we actually are in everyday life (Brockner and Higgins, 2001; Waugh, 2001; Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Ogilvie, 1987).

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Drawing on complexity theory (Andriani and McKelvey, 2005; Boyatzis, 2004) and coactiavtion models on emotion (Cacioppo and Berntson, 1994; Boyatzis, 2004; Diamond and Aspinwall, 2003), I suggest that recurrent activation of the PEA (ideal self) and NEA (real self) leads to positive and sustainable intentional change when the change process is primarily leveraged by the individual's positive emotional attractor and when the negative emotional attractor is considered secondarily. Recent application of complexity theory to the study of organizations and organizational dynamics (Rosenhead, 2005; Casti, 1994, Ford and Ford, 1994) has inspired use of complexity laws on attractors, scalability (fractal geometry), self-organization, and spacio-structural properties of systems (Andriani and McKelvey, 2005) in understanding how positive and negative emotion work together in intentional change (Boyatzis, 2004). On a related front, cognitive perspectives on affect system bipolarity and emotional appraisal suggest that positive and negative emotion work together in helping us to think, learn and cope in moments of stress, challenge and change (Schulkin *et al.*, 2003; Larsen *et al.* in Aspinwall and Staudinger (Eds), 2003; Argyris, 1999; Green *et al.*, 1999; Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 1991). Especially notable is the three-dimensional evaluative space model (ESM) on coactivation of positive and negative emotion developed by Cacioppo and Berntson (1994) to capture the multiple psychophysiological operations of positive and negative evaluative processes (Cacioppo and Berntson, 1999; Cacioppo *et al.*, 1999; Russell and Barrett, 1999).

Taken together, complexity theory and coactivation models on emotion enable us to offer a more nuanced theory of adult intentional change than customary approaches that focus largely on gap management or, alternatively, on strengths enhancement. Specifically, intentional change theory (Boyatzis, 2004) posits that the positive emotional attractor and the negative emotional attractor both play a pivotal role in intentional change. By priming (Ferguson and Bargh, 2004; Bargh *et al.*, 1992; Moretti and Higgins, 1999; Bargh *et al.*, 1988) the ideal self the PEA galvanizes change that is authentic, heartfelt, intrinsic; it kindles core passions and motivations that drive us toward our best selves. By priming the real self the NEA galvanizes change that is pragmatic, instrumental, extrinsic; it stimulates adaptive responses that help us to recognize problems, overcome shortfalls and deal with life challenges.

The PEA and NEA also trigger different physiological responses. The PEA arouses the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) and neural circuits predominantly in the left prefrontal cortex (Boyatzis, 2004). PSNS arousal slows our breathing, drops our blood pressure, boosts our immune system, causes us to feel calm and expands the range of ideas and possibilities that occur to us in the moment (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004; Boyatzis, 2004). The NEA arouses the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and neural circuits in the right prefrontal cortex (Boyatzis, 2004). SNS arousal speeds our breathing, increases our blood pressure, tightens our facial muscles, sends blood to large muscle groups and narrows our momentary range of focus and attention (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004; Boyatzis, 2004). This fight-flight response is a psychobiological tool for survival in threatening situations (Mendoza and Ruys, 2001; Fredrickson *et al.*, 2000; Bion, 1961).

A central premise in intentional change theory (Boyatzis, 2004) is that predominant PEA arousal anchors the change process in constructive cognitive and physiological processes that lead to robust learning and change. When NEA arousal occurs within a

change event that is primarily anchored in or leveraged by the person's own values, possibilities, hopes, strengths and optimism, the individual is more resilient and flexible in overcoming current problems, weaknesses or fears. This idea raises important questions. Why does primary accentuation of the positive emotional attractor enhance engagement in intentional change? Why is the negative emotional attractor given secondary attention? What are the benefits of recurrent PEA-NEA activation, and why does ICT place emphasis on sequential ideal self-real self activation? I address these issues in the following sections.

Presented first is a brief overview on the functional role of emotion in intentional change followed by a closer look at the two emotional attractors (the PEA and NEA) in intentional change theory (Boyatzis, 2001a, 2004b). The advantages of recurrent PEA-NEA activation are outlined next and our emphasis on sequential PEA-NEA activation is explored. Finally, an underway study on PEA-NEA activation is briefly highlighted along with several implications of ICT work on future research and practice.

The functional role of emotion in intentional change

Emotions are response tendencies (Fredrickson, 2001, Frijda, 1988; James, 1894) that prepare us for action (Lazarus, 1991a) when an event or experience requires us to change (Mendoza and Ruys, 2001). Simply put, emotions function as informal information processing systems (Schulkin *et al.*, 2003). They help us to quickly assess what is going on in our social and physical environment and decide on reactions that promote our survival and well-being (Izard, 2002; Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Lazarus, 1991a; Frijda, 1988). Emotion researcher James Gross (1998, p. 273) offers a succinct summary of the functional perspective on emotions:

> Historically, emotions were seen as nonspecific, disruptive activation states (Hebb, 1949; Young, 1943). More recent analyses emphasize the functions emotions serve (Keltner and Gross, in press). Although emotions address different adaptive problems (Elkman, 1992), they generally facilitate decision making (Oatley and Johnson-Laird, 1987), prepare the individual for rapid motor responses (Frijda, 1986), and provide information regarding the ongoing match between organism and environment (Schwartz and Clore, 1983). In addition to their intraorganismic functions, emotions also serve social functions. They inform us about others' behavioral intentions (Fridlund, 1994), give us clues as to whether something is good or bad (Walden, 1991), and script our social behavior (Averill, 1980; Keltnes and Buswell, 1977).

As informal information processors, emotions are a complex set of psychophysiological arousal, appraisal and response mechanisms that operate at multiple levels of experience (Schulkin *et al.*, 2003). These include the situational level of experience (assessment of a particular stimulus situation or event); the intrapersonal level (assessment of the situation's positive and/or negative impact on oneself); and the social system level (assessment of the situation's positive and/or negative impact on others in general) (Solomon and Stone, 2002). Whether we are at work, at home or at play, our emotions serve as important guides to situational meaning and response, intrapersonal meaning and response, and interpersonal meaning and response. Guiding emotions are especially important when we undergo intentional change. Because they play a figural role in organizing our sense making, adaptation and performance at multiple levels of experience, emotions are critical to intentional change.

Emotions help us to target the behaviors that we want to change

Intentional change is desired, deliberate, altering. It results from the conscious effort to establish new behaviors or conditions that are different from what they presently are or appear to be (Ford and Ford, 1995). We have seen that emotions are informal information processing systems that move us to act. Cognitive appraisal perspectives additionally view emotions as an organized set of components that include construal of behaviors and events as being: of interest; goal relevant; potential resources for coping; and/or personally resonant (Silva, 2005; Lazarus, 1991b, c). When we make a conscious effort to change (i.e. when we undergo intentional change) emotions help us to identify and focus on which behaviors we want or need to address (Doring, 2003; Goldie, 2002; Book, 1999). Research findings on emotional appraisal have further shown that emotions focus our interest and attention on the specific goals and behaviors that we deem most important to adaptation and change.

Emotion regulation researchers also have examined the particular ways in which emotions help us to choose the aspects that we desire to change. Out of the many features of a change context, emotions help us to regulate and leverage the feelings and responses that will optimize our effectiveness and success (Gross, 2002). Intentional change theory (Boyatzis, 2004) emphasizes the iterative, discontinuous and cyclical nature of intentional change, and how the desire for change both triggers felt dissonance with the present state-of-being and catalyzes self-directed work on adaptation or change (i.e. disequilibrium). Diamond and Aspinwall (2003, p. 149) describe emotion regulation as "effortful striving toward a homeostatic set point – some pleasant, not-too-distracting state that allows an individual to bring his or her full attention to bear at some task at hand." A key contribution of emotion regulation to intentional change is the "effortful striving" and attentional deployment (Gross, 2002) that facilitate selection of the change goals and target behaviors that we most want to focus on, adopt and sustain.

Emotions guide vital emotional knowledge and competencies

Intentional change turns on emotional knowledge and emotional competencies. Human development, learning and performance is promoted by "accurate perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion, effective utilization of emotion in the service of cognitive processing, effective comprehension and communication of emotion-relevant concepts, and the capacity to regulate one's own emotions and those of others" (Diamond and Aspinwall, 2003, p. 131). But emotional information processing can be accurate or inaccurate, depending on the emotional knowledge and skill of the perceiver (Schulkin *et al.*, 2003). Emotional intelligence research and practice suggest that the ability to accurately perceive and manage the feelings of self and others is the crux of emotional intelligence (Caruso and Salovey, 2004; Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Matthews *et al.*, 2002; Goleman, 1998, 1995). Moreover, developing and mastering the emotional intelligence competencies of self-awareness, self management, social awareness and relationship management have repeatedly been shown to distinguish high performers from average performers in educational and management contexts (Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Boyatzis, 2000, 2001; Goleman, 1998, 1995). The understanding that effective use of EI competencies strongly enhances human performance and well being has spawned a vast management coaching industry, restructured educational delivery in the public and

private sectors and heightened public awareness on the importance of emotional processing in daily experience (Matthews *et al.*, 2002; Tobias, 1996).

Well-developed EI competencies can have an enormous impact on the success and sustainability of intentional change. Persons high in EI and experienced in use of EI competencies are more likely to accurately perceive the reasons behind their own behavior and that of others, more adept at understanding social interaction and organizational politics, more successful at building and sustaining strong relationships, more effective in leadership and performance, and more optimistic and resilient under pressure or stress. Their superior skills in apprehending and processing emotional information give them a leg up in the intentional change process.

Emotions frame our motive outlook on change: intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation

Because they alert us to the need for change and organize our cognitive and physical responses, emotions frame our motive outlook on the intentional change process. Emotions trigger two different kinds of motive frames. Intrinsic interest is triggered when the person is drawn to change that aligns with his or her own personal values, goals and standards. Conversely, extrinsic interest is triggered when the person is drawn to change that aligns with values, goals and standards that the environment holds for him or her (Moretti and Higgins, 1999; Mullan and Markland, 1997). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are both important. Intrinsic motivation to change organizes goals and behaviors that reflect our inner values, hopes, desires (the ideal self), while extrinsic motivation to change organizes goals and behaviors that reflect our need to respond to social expectations, pressures, controls (the ought self/real self) (Mullan and Markland, 1997; Higgins *et al.*, 1994).

Similarly, regulatory focus theory defines the intrinsic needs and beliefs that reflect an individual's own hopes, wishes and aspirations as promotion focused, i.e. motivated by the need to promote and develop the ideal self (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). Extrinsic needs and beliefs that reflect an individual's interest in meeting his or her perceived social obligations, duties and responsibilities are defined as prevention focused – i.e. motivated by the need to protect and promote the ought and/or real self (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). Most important, in empirical research studies on emotion and regulatory focus, Brockner and Higgins (2001) reported that people adopted either a promotion focus or a prevention focus in response to the experimenters' situational induction of regulatory focus. One experiment used a framing manipulation that described the "promotion focus" condition as concerned with maximizing gains and the "prevention focus" condition as preventing losses. A second experiment used a priming manipulation in which the "ideal self" condition successfully primed the subject's ideal self (the person's hopes and aspirations for the future/the parents' hopes for his/her future) whereas the "ought self/real self" condition primed the subjects' ought self/real self (the person's perceived obligations and duties/the parents expectations of him/her) (Brockner and Higgins, 2001, pp. 40-2). These findings offer empirical evidence that people can be primed to adopt either a promotion focus (ideal self) or prevention focus (ought/real self) either by framing their perception of the situation or by priming their ideal self or real self (Brockner and Higgins, 2001).

The two emotional attractors in intentional change

The positive emotional attractor

The hopes, dreams, possibilities, strengths, optimism and self-directed learning goals that make up our ideal self are the positive emotional attractor (PEA) that pulls us toward intrinsic intentional change. The organizing power of PEA stems from positive emotions (and emotional appraisals) that are associated with and aroused by affirming thoughts, feelings, memories, meaning and self-worth that cohere in the ideal self – and by PEA arousal of the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) and neural circuits predominantly in the left prefrontal cortex (Boyatzis, 2004). The many benefits of positive emotion have been reported in recent works on positive psychology (Aspinwall and Staudinger (Eds), 2003; Cameron *et al.* (Eds), 2003; Lopez and Snyder (Eds), 2003). In addition, Barbara Fredrickson (Fredrickson *et al.*, 2003; Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002; Fredrickson, 2001, 1998; Fredrickson *et al.*, 2000; Fredrickson and Levenson, 1998), Michele Tugade (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004; Tugade *et al.*, 2004) and their colleagues have contributed extensive evidence on the ways in which positive emotions broaden and build thought-action repertoires and attentional focus, help us to recover from negative emotional experiences and crises, optimize physical health and emotional well-being, enhance resilience, and undo the damaging effects of negative emotion. Because it keeps us grounded in our ideal self and positive emotions, the PEA makes a distinct contribution to each stage of discovery in intentional change theory (i.e. ICT) (Boyatzis, 2004a, 2001b).

Discovery #1. Who do I want to be? (my ideal self). When experiencing ICT Discovery #1 the individual asks the seminal question, "who do I want to be?" This query stimulates self-reflection on the ideal self and its elemental contents. When intentional change is initiated by connecting to the ideal self, the change process is moved by and grounded in intrinsic motivation, personal passion, resonant meaning, belief in possibility and the psychophysiological benefits of PSNS arousal and neurogenesis.

Discovery #2. Who am I? (my real self); where are my ideal self and real self different? (my gaps). In Discovery #2 the individual connects to the real self by asking "who am I in everyday experience?" The PEA assists this stage of reflection by introducing the restorative effects of positive emotions that facilitate cognitive flexibility, self-affirmation, personal resilience and recovery from negative affect and thought. Consideration of present reality, problems, weaknesses, fears and pessimism is rendered less threatening by these balancing effects of positive emotion.

The PEA provides the same restorative effects of positive emotion (facilitating cognitive flexibility, self-affirmation, personal resilience and recovery from negative emotion) when the individual works on discerning the gaps between the ideal self and real self. At this time PEA also enables positive reappraisal (John and Gross, 2004; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000) that helps the individual to refocuses attention on what good can be learned or leveraged from problem-focused coping.

Discovery #3. what is my learning agenda? (Building on strengths while reducing gaps). In Discovery #3 the individual develops a learning agenda that delineates his or her change goals, action steps and time phased approach to implementing desired change. At this step PEA arousal keeps the change effort anchored in authentic passion and resonant meaning. It also leverages mindfulness and effort intensity – and the other adaptive effects of positive emotion.

Discovery #4. New behavior, thoughts, and feelings through experimentation and building neural pathways through practicing to mastery. In Discovery #4 the individual is involved in ongoing experimentation and practice on new behavior. During experimentation and practice the PEA plays a critical role in sustaining the individual's optimism, enthusiasm, commitment to change, and his or her resilience in moments of stress or disappointment. Most important, the PEA inspires the individual to stay the course and also offers the benefits associated with PSNS arousal.

Discovery #5. Trusting relationships that help, support and encourage each step in the process. The PEA assists the development and maintenance of resonant relationships by activating the individual's upbeat socio-relational interest and energy. The PEA triggers positive ideation and feeling – cognitions that are emotionally centering. It opens the individual to the act of reaching out to others for feedback and trusting in others for support. The PEA also helps the person to exude authentic passion for the change process underway.

The negative emotional attractor

The present reality, fears, problems, shortfalls, pessimism and self-directed improvement goals that make up our real self are the negative emotional attractor (NEA) that pulls us toward extrinsic intentional change. The organizing power of the NEA stems from negative emotions (and emotional appraisals) that are associated with and aroused by the dissonant thoughts, feelings, memories, meaning and concerns about self-efficacy that comprise the real self – and by NEA arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and neural circuits predominantly in the right prefrontal cortex (Boyatzis, 2004). The benefits of negative emotion issue from their central role in calling our attention to behaviors and events that compromise our effectiveness, threaten our safety, drain our resources, increase our stress or require us to improve or protect ourselves. Because it makes us aware of salient social and environmental stressors, the NEA makes an important contribution to ICT Discoveries #2, #3, #4 and #5 (Boyatzis, 2004, 2001).

Discovery #2. Who am I? (my real self); where are my ideal self and real self different? (my gaps). The NEA is the central issue in Discovery #2. It assists this stage of reflection by triggering rapid recognition of problems or threat, appraisal of negative feedback, identification of shortfalls or weaknesses, surfacing of fears and anxieties and the mobilization of psychophysiological energy for dealing with real-time concerns. The NEA also stimulates these same pragmatic and necessary information-processing behaviors (Spector *et al.*, 2000) when the individual works on identifying gaps between the ideal self and real self. At this time the NEA keeps the individual more narrowly focused on the challenges of present reality.

Discovery #3. What is my learning agenda? (building on strengths while reducing gaps). The NEA promotes Discovery # 3 by helping the individual to stay cognizant about key environmental requirements and personal improvements that need to be immediately addressed. The NEA also supports analysis of what needs to be done first (priority-setting), what stands in the way (obstacles, barriers), what resources are lacking and what isn't presently working. This information is central to the development of pragmatic change goals and action steps – and helps the person to articulate precisely what he or she needs to change.

Discovery #4. New behavior, thoughts and feelings through experimentation and building neural pathways through practicing to mastery. During experimentation and practice, the NEA focuses attention on what isn't working in the moment. It thus serves as a yardstick for day-to-day progress. The NEA also can help the individual recognize when a change goal or learning plan needs to be adjusted or when more pressing extrinsic requirements demand immediate attention.

Discovery #5. Trusting relationships that help, support and encourage each step in the process. In Discovery #5, the NEA raises the individual's day-to-day awareness of social connections and/or relationships that may be functioning at a less-than-optimal level. When used wisely, this information can help the person be more astute and mindful about who to approach for feedback, guidance and support.

The advantages of recurrent PEA-NEA activation

Recurrent PEA-NEA activation is a winning approach to intentional change. Diamond and Aspinwall (2003, p. 140) convincingly argue that leveraging the interplay between positive and negative emotional states may be a very effective strategy for emotional regulation, and by extension, for intentional change:

> Because positive emotions are known to enhance flexible and creative thinking and broad-minded coping (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002; Isen, 1993a, 2000b), some of their most important effects may occur *in interaction* with negative emotional states, as they prevent acute episodes of negative affect from becoming solidified into defensive and maladaptive regulatory patterns. Coactivation of negative and positive emotions may also enable people to learn from adversity in ways that promote future resiliency by allowing individuals to bring negative events, emotions, and experiences to mind when they have the positive resources to process them in depth (Larsen *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, the ability to simultaneously consider both goal-related possibilities/opportunities and potential *barriers* to their attainment would seem to be the linchpin of effective self-regulation (Oettingen *et al.*, 2001) as well as proactive coping (Aspinwal and Taylor, 1997).

Co-occurring positive and negative emotional appraisal helps us to understand and respond to environmental complexity (Izard, 2002). Thus it is reasonable to suggest that recurrent PEA-NEA activation during intentional change accesses a broader range of emotional knowledge than primary reliance on only one emotional attractor and its related process of emotional appraisal. Life is complex. Daily experience bombards us with challenging stimuli at multiple levels of experience (e.g. situational, intrapersonal, interpersonal) that produce a host of emotional reactions and behaviors (in ourselves and others). Recurrent PEA-NEA activation helps us to deal with this complexity.

Similarly, Larsen *et al.* (2003, p. 213) suggest that coactivation of positive and negative emotions "may allow individuals to make sense of stressors, to gain mastery over future stressors, and to transcend traumatic experiences." These researchers further argue that coactivation of positive and negative emotional processes may be central to one's ability to focus on stressful information long enough to find adaptive solutions (Larsen *et al.* in Aspinwall and Staudinger, 2003, p. 220). In this view coactivation of positive and negative emotional processing is an important human strength because it enables us to work through and transcend negative emotion more effectively.

Sequential activation of the PEA and NEA

As discussed earlier, ICT (Boyatzis, 2004) positions recurrent arousal of both the PEA and NEA as a central feature of intentional change. Moreover, intentional change is thought to be more effective and sustainable when the PEA serves as the primary or anchoring focus of the change process and when the NEA is accorded secondary focus or attention. This idea is supported by several research perspectives on emotional processing.

Emotional information processing involves attentional deployment or the act of selecting which of the many aspects of a situation to focus on (Gross, 2002). Thus, attentional deployment can be viewed as a procedure for prioritizing and sequencing an individual's situational focus and response behaviors. Likewise, Diamond and Aspinwall (2003) describe emotion regulation and emotion-focused coping as involving procedural knowledge and the prioritization of emotional state maintenance and change (Diamond and Aspinwall, 2003, pp. 136-7). Regulatory focus theory further suggests that people alternate between addressing their ideal self (or promotion focused wishes/aspirations) and their real self (or prevention focused social obligations/requirements). These regulatory focus procedures, and the cycle of focusing and refocusing on the ideal self (part of the PEA) and real self (part of the NEA) support the ICT view (Boyatzis, 2004) on sequential PEA-NEA activation and the advantages of double-loop (Argyris, 1992) emotional processing.

Recent research and theory on the autonomic nervous system (ANS) sheds an interesting light on this matter. The ANS is the neuro-endocrine-immune system traditionally thought to contain two branches, the parasympathetic branch (rest/rebuild) and the sympathetic branch (fight/flight). Based on new research discoveries, polyvagal theory (Porges, 1988, 2001, 2003) contends that the ANS instead contains three branches: the parasympathetic branch that triggers more primitive stress responses; the sympathetic branch that triggers more sophisticated survival responses; and the social nervous system branch, a third and more modern branch that triggers higher order social and emotional affect responses (Chitty, 2004). New evidence on ongoing brain evolution and increasing ANS complexity suggests that our emotional information-processing mechanisms may be far more dynamic and flexible than previously thought.

An underway study on PEA-NEA activation in executive coaching

The author's dissertation study on the effects of sequential activation of the PEA and NEA in intentional change is currently underway. This research on executive coaching will empirically test the ICT claim (Boyatzis, 2004) that sequential ideal self-real self activation leads to positive and sustainable intentional change when the change process is primarily leveraged by the individual's positive emotional attractor and when the negative emotional attractor is considered secondarily. The study specifically looks at four factors assumed to play an important role in producing positive outcomes for coaching recipients: the coached person's appraisal of 360-degree feedback, positive functioning in work on change goals and an action plan, level of stress associated with the coaching session, and satisfaction with the coaching experience and relationship.

Implications for future research and practice

Ongoing research on the role of positive and negative emotion in intentional change can contribute useful knowledge on the interconnections between emotional information processing, emotion regulation and adult intentional change (e.g. adult learning and development; goal pursuit; social networking and social support). Diamond and Aspinwall (2003) have issued a call for this kind of research and for more work on coactivation of positive and negative emotion.

James Gross (2002) has called for the extension of emotion regulation research to the study of organization and management processes. Research on intentional change in executive coaching arenas would seem an auspicious place to begin. Lack of published empirical research on the cognitive and behavioral aspects of coaching has produced a coaching establishment rich in helping traditions and anecdotal success stories but weak in research evidence and supporting theory. Work on sequential PEA-NEA activation and its effects on intentional change has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the coaching literature. Many questions still remain concerning the impact of positive and negative emotion on emotion-focused coping, workplace performance and holistic adaptation and health. More research on how to support people to be effective in their process of intentional change can provide vital information on career and life success.

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