

# Emotion regulation strategies in couples: a relational goals perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Romantic relationships confront individuals with numerous challenges. It pushes them to not only deal with intrapersonal factors but also to attain certain goals in the context of an interpersonal dynamic. Certain behaviors can lead to positive consequences, whereas others may exacerbate the circumstances. There is a broad gap in literature concerning the dynamic between emotion regulation and goal achievement, as defined by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this study we aim to research the influence of certain emotion regulation strategies on the fulfillment of relational goals in romantic couples, interacting in a negative conflict situation. We, more specifically, study the dynamic between social sharing and relatedness frustration and the dynamic between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration in a cross-sectional design. The sample of participants exists of 260 members of 130 Belgian couples. The couples were asked to fill in surveys before and after the laboratory session in which they were videotaped in a positive and negative interaction. To investigate our research questions, we analyzed the data using multilevel Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM). The results showed that for men, actor- and partner effects were statistically significant concerning the link between social sharing and relatedness frustration. For women, these results were not statistically significant. There were no statistically significant (partner- and actor)effects for men and women concerning the link between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration. These findings can contribute to the implementation of certain interventions during couples counseling. It might be interesting to explore the importance of connection and to assess the level to which it is present in the romantic relationship. If there are evident challenges in feeling related to each other, it could present an opportunity to enhance their communication abilities in therapy. Various hypotheses are proposed in regarding these findings. Finally, strengths and limitations of this study are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

Romantische relaties confronteren individuen met tal van uitdagingen. Het dwingt hen om niet alleen om te gaan met intrapersonlijke factoren, maar ook om bepaalde doelen te bereiken in de context van een interpersoonlijke dynamiek. Bepaald gedrag kan leiden tot positieve en gewenste gevolgen, terwijl ander gedrag de situatie net helemaal kan verergeren. Er is een grote leemte in de literatuur over de dynamiek tussen emotieregulatie en het bereiken van doelen, zoals gedefinieerd door de Zelf-Determinatie Theorie (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In deze studie onderzoeken we de invloed van bepaalde strategieën voor emotieregulatie op de vervulling van relationele doelen bij romantische koppels die interageren in een negatieve conflictsituatie. Meer specifiek bestuderen we de dynamiek tussen sociaal delen en de frustratie van verbondenheid en de dynamiek tussen positieve herwaardering en de frustratie van autonomie in een cross-sectioneel design. De steekproef bestond uit 260 leden van 130 Belgische koppels. Er werd gevraagd aan de koppels om enquêtes in te vullen voor en na de laboratoriumsessie waarin ze op video werden opgenomen in een positieve en negatieve interactie. Om onze onderzoeksvragen te onderzoeken, analyseerden we de gegevens met behulp van multilevel Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM). De resultaten toonden aan dat voor mannen actor- en partnereffecten statistisch significant waren wat betreft het verband tussen sociaal delen en de frustratie van verbondenheid. Voor vrouwen waren deze resultaten niet statistisch significant. Er werden geen statistisch significante (partner- en actor)effecten gevonden voor mannen en vrouwen wat betreft het verband tussen positieve herwaardering en de frustratie van autonomie. Deze bevindingen kunnen bijdragen aan de implementatie van bepaalde interventies tijdens relatietherapie. Het kan interessant zijn om het belang van verbondenheid te onderzoeken en om na te gaan in welke mate dit aanwezig is in de romantische relatie. Als er duidelijk uitdagingen zijn in het zich verwant voelen met elkaar, kan dit een kans zijn om bijvoorbeeld aan hun communicatievaardigheden te werken in relatietherapie. Er worden verschillende hypothesen voorgesteld met betrekking tot de bekomen bevindingen. Tot slot worden de sterke punten en beperkingen van dit onderzoek besproken, samen met suggesties voor toekomstig onderzoek.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The concept of romantic relationships and the obstacles that come along with that has always been a great interest of mine. How can individuals create a flourishing yet stable connection to one another whilst also respecting their own needs, values and time? The field of relational therapy is rapidly expanding and evolving, and I aspire to be a part of that domain in the future. The systemic theoretical frame is one that has always spoken to me so when I heard that I got to participate in a study in this theoretical field, I felt very honored and excited. I would like to take this time to thank my co-supervisor Davide Pirrone for always being available and flexible and for guiding me through these past two years. I've learned a lot and am very thankful for your time and effort. Subsequently, I would like to thank Prof. Lesley Verhofstadt for allowing me to participate in this study. Finally, I would also like to thank my parents for giving me endless opportunities to develop myself and to learn new skills.

Het concept van romantische relaties en de obstakels die daarbij komen kijken, is altijd al een grote interesse van mij geweest. Hoe kunnen individuen een bloeiende en toch stabiele band met elkaar creëren en tegelijkertijd hun eigen behoeften, waarden en tijd respecteren? Het vakgebied van de relatietherapie breidt zich snel uit en ik heb de ambitie om daar in de toekomst deel van uit te maken. Het systemische theoretische kader heeft me altijd aangesproken, dus toen ik hoorde dat ik mocht deelnemen aan een studie in dit theoretische veld, voelde ik me zeer vereerd en enthousiast. Ik wil graag van de gelegenheid gebruik maken om mijn begeleider Davide Pirrone te bedanken voor het feit dat hij altijd beschikbaar en flexibel is geweest en mij de afgelopen 2 jaar heeft begeleid. Ik heb veel geleerd en ben erg dankbaar voor je tijd en moeite. Vervolgens wil ik Prof. Lesley Verhofstadt bedanken om mij te laten deelnemen aan dit onderzoek. Tot slot wil ik ook mijn ouders bedanken voor de eindeloze mogelijkheden die ze me hebben gegeven om mezelf te ontwikkelen en nieuwe vaardigheden te leren.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this study, we will research the link between emotion regulation strategies and relational goals in romantic relationships. More specifically, we will look into the link between social sharing and relatedness goals on one hand and on the other hand the link between positive reappraisal and autonomy goals. In other words; are higher levels of social sharing in couples indicative for the fulfillment of relatedness goals and are higher levels of positive reappraisal in couples indicative for the fulfillment of autonomy goals? But also, are lower levels of social sharing in couples indicative for the frustration of relatedness goals and are lower levels of positive reappraisal in couples indicative for the frustration of autonomy goals?

### **Emotion regulation strategies**

Emotion regulation can be described as a process in which individuals modulate their emotions in order to respond to environmental demands in a conscious and nonconscious manner (Aldao et al., 2010). It allows us to regulate and modify the magnitude and/or type of emotional experience or emotion-evoking event. Several theoretical models propose that effective emotion regulation is associated with good health outcomes, improved relationships and increased performance, in the academic field as well as the working field (Brackett & Salovey, 2006; John and Gross, 2004). While on the other hand, emotion dysregulation may be linked to maladaptive psychological outcomes (Bardeen & Fergus, 2014). Recently, there is an augmented interest in the role of mindfulness in emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). It primarily focuses on the non-judgmental acceptance of emotions, being present in the moment, awareness of thoughts, feelings and sensations and accepting them as they are (Aldao et al., 2010).

When a psychologically relevant situation happens, an individual will attend it in ways that result in appraisals of what it means in respect of that person's goals. The emotional response is thus generated by these appraisals (Burkitt, 2017). Depending on one's goals, this person will regulate their emotions in a way that will impact the dynamics of the emotion (Gross, 2014). Gross proposes five types or "families" of emotion regulation in his process model. For example *situation selection*; selecting or avoiding certain situations we expect will give rise to desirable (or undesirable) emotions (Gross & Thompson, 2007). *Situation modification* refers to changing the situation in order to change its emotional impact (Gross, 2014). Third, *attentional deployment* involves changing the mental focus (instead of the

situation itself) on specific aspects of the situation in order to create a desired emotional response and also deflect attention from other aspects that might result in unwanted and/or negative emotions (Gross, 2014). Forth, *cognitive change* refers to changing the way we think about a situation by interpreting it a differently (Gross, 2014). And last but not least; *response modulation* involves trying to change, hide or suppress the emotion(al response) completely (Gross, 2014). According to Gross (2002) the most effective emotion regulation strategy seems to be cognitive reappraisal. A new personal meaning is given to a situation that modifies psychological, behavioral and experiential response patterns without requiring ongoing self-regulation and monitoring. A potentially emotionally charged situation is thus cognitively reinterpreted in terms of less emotional or entirely different emotions; rather than someone thinking about what could go wrong and becoming fearful, they can reappraise the situation as a great opportunity and reinterpret the nerves as excitement. This allows a person to “up regulate” positive emotions (excitement and positive anticipation) and “down regulate” negative emotions (fear and nervousness).

It is important to emphasize the fact that emotion holds a relational aspect; people affect each other in their interactions. For Campos et al. (2004) emotion is the result of a person-event transaction. This event can also be emotional communication between two people, for example expressive reactions in the face, voice, body gestures and linguistic expressions. It facilitates the communication of impressions that others have of us and that we have about them. Because this involves our feelings toward other people and how their perceptions of us impact how we feel about ourselves, the reaction to these impressions is emotional (Burkitt, 2017). As humans we are constantly in interaction with each other. It is very rare that we experience simple or single emotions of which we are immediately aware. It happens more often that our responses in social situations are subtle, mixed or ambiguous (Burkitt, 2017). Within a romantic relationship, each person experiences a variety of emotions. These emotional experiences (of both partners) can influence each other, resulting in the opportunity to regulate each other’s emotional experiences (Butler & Randall, 2012). For instance, a partner can show an emotional change indicating a need for support. This can result in the non-stressed partner taking action and doing just that. (Schoebi & Randall, 2015). It has been proven that interpersonal emotion regulation strategies can form a buffer against emotional distress, which is especially advantageous for people dealing with mental illness (Hofmann, 2014). According to Campos et al. (2011) emotion regulation in romantic relationships occurs when the goals and strivings of these individuals clash and when they have to compromise and work together to achieve their goals while also regulating their emotions. This approach still very much remains solidly

individualistic; the individuals strive for their own *individual* goals. Studies show that interpersonal emotion regulation results in higher levels of relationship health (Kaya & Kaya, 2023). An indication of emotion regulation in healthy relationships is the expression of each other's voices (Kaya & Kaya, 2023). Emotion regulation issues can affect the way partners cope with disputes in adult romantic relationships and consequently, the level of relationship satisfaction (Bloch et al., 2014). It is very important to be able to regulate emotions when relationship difficulties occur; this can benefit the optimal functioning of these relationships (English et al., 2013). Levy-Gigi & Shamay-Tsoory (2017) found that interpersonal emotion regulation as opposed to intrapersonal emotion regulation, is also more beneficial in reducing stress.

### **Types of emotion regulation strategies**

It is possible to divide emotion regulation strategies in different ways. For example; intrapersonal emotion regulation and extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation. Intrapersonal emotion regulation strategies (ER) have been studied frequently and thoroughly. Intrapersonal emotion regulation strategies are used by an individual to monitor, evaluate and modify their own affective state (Thompson, 1994) while interpersonal strategies are used by an individual to influence someone else's affective state (Niven, 2017). The concept of intrapersonal emotional regulation encompasses a variety of methods by which individuals can exert control over the emotions they experience, their timing, and their expression (Gross, 1998a). This implies that according to the interpersonal view, people are able to regulate their emotions in order to attain a desirable emotional state. The intrapersonal view also hypothesizes that the mechanisms of emotion regulation are relatively context-independent. Similarly, the implementation of emotion regulation strategies are believed to generalize, regardless of the social surroundings of an individual (Campos et al., 2011). The interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (IER) on the other hand, remain relatively rarely investigated. They can be prosocial (to improve another person's mood) or non-prosocial (to worsen another person's mood) (Austin & Vahle, 2016). Hofmann et al. (2016) proposed that there are four distinct components in interpersonal emotion regulation; *enhancement of positive affect (EPA)*, *perspective taking (PT)*, *social modelling (SM)* and *soothing (S)*. EPA is the only strategy that involves spending time with other people in order to reach higher levels of positive emotions, the other three are used when trying to diminish unpleasant emotions (Hofmann et al., 2016). PT refers to asking other people about their opinion concerning upsetting situations and feelings. When people implement SM, they take someone as an example and imitate the



strategies used by this role model when struggling with negative experiences and emotions. Lastly, S refers to trying to understand and show compassion to others in order to help them deal with negative emotions. When emotion regulation is looked at from a relational perspective, it can involve the management of conflicting goals. In this case, it is not the emotional state that is regulated but the conflict between goals of one partner and those of the other (Campos et al., 2011).

Reeck et al.'s study (2016) showed that emotion regulation seems to process in consecutive sequences. Firstly there is intrapersonal emotion regulation, then the identification of target person's emotions and the need for regulation (cognitive empathy) and lastly the interpersonal emotion regulation. Other studies showed (Contardi et al., 2016) that difficulties with IER might be linked to higher levels of hostility while cognitive empathy might be a mediator in this process. ER strategies are also believed to be linked to prosocial behavior (Lockwood et al., 2014).

Another division can be made, namely adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. Adaptive emotion regulation strategies have been shown to be linked to beneficial outcomes such as reducing negative affect, increased pain tolerance, better interpersonal functioning and lower cardiac reactivity (Aldao & Hoeksma, 2012). Two examples are reappraisal and problem solving. Reappraisal refers to the concept of formulating positive interpretations or perspectives in a stressful situation as a way of reducing stress (Gross, 1998b). This would result in positive emotional and physical responses to emotion-evoking stimuli. Problem solving on the other hand, allows the individual to respond to a problem in a conscious manner in order to change a stressful situation or contain its consequences (Aldao et al., 2010). Examples are brainstorming solutions or planning a course of action. Maladaptive strategies on the other hand such as avoidance, hiding emotions, suppression or worrying are found to be linked to detrimental outcomes (Aldao & Hoeksma, 2012). It can be associated with increases in negative affect, increases in sympathetic activation, lower autonomic flexibility, memory difficulties and lower levels of instrumental behavior and social support (Aldao & Hoeksma, 2012).

### **Positive reappraisal**

Cognitive reappraisal refers to restructuring cognitions in a way that changes the potential emotional response before it happens (Kardum et al., 2021). This leads to the opportunity of regulating emotions through cognitions (Garnefski et al., 2001). Positive reappraisal in particular refers to giving a certain stressful event a positive interpretation (Rusu

et al., 2018). It allows individuals to reflect and interpret negative situations in a positive manner (Nowlan et al., 2016). It has found to be a skill that takes time to develop and to integrate into a person's lifestyle (Nowlan et al., 2016). Previous studies showed that the use of this specific emotion regulation strategy augments with age, indicating that older individuals seem to generally interpret negative events in a more positive way (Carstensen et al., 2011). Not only is higher age linked to a higher frequency of positive reappraisal, the ability for its use also improves (Hall et al., 2010; Nowlan et al., 2015). Various studies showed that positive reappraisal appears to be linked to positive emotion (Sears et al., 2003). The link with negative emotion is less clear. Nowlan et al.'s (2016) study shows mixed results when the hypothesis that positive reappraisal would be linked to a decrease in negative emotion, is researched.

The existing literature has demonstrated that it is associated to positive relationship outcomes, such as marital quality (Finkel et al., 2013). Reappraisal is also positively linked to engagement during conflict and conversation memory (Richards et al., 2003). Ben-Naim et al. (2013) found that a physiological consequence of the use of this emotion regulation strategy during interactions in couples is associated with lower levels of cardiovascular arousal of both partners. Rusu et al. (2018) found that for men, positive reappraisal is significantly positively correlated with relationship satisfaction while for women, this is not the case. It has also been found to be linked to less relationship aggression (Rodriguez et al., 2021) and to be an effective strategy to reduce unwanted behavior (for example drinking alcohol) (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Sisson et al.'s (2022) findings showed that cognitive reappraisal is associated with higher levels of change progress (asking the other partner to change dissatisfying behaviors or characteristics in order to resolve recurring disagreements, i.e., partner regulation) as reported by both partners, in contrast to the costs of suppression. They also found that the use of this emotion regulation strategy may contribute to feeling closer to their partner's ideals, both short term and long term.

### **Social sharing**

Social sharing refers to the concept of subjective awareness that certain features of one's experience are shared by others (Colle et al., 2017). It is found to be a primary objective in itself, innate and noticeable in very early stages of development. We possess a certain intrinsic motivation to share social exchanges and to engage in social reciprocal interactions. For example joint attention is a very early signal of this concept. Social media is another example of this spontaneous human motivation to participate in social sharing. It can also be defined according to the mental state, the content, which is shared between two people (Colle et al., 2017). Actions achieved by two people also require the same intention and the same goal. This

collective intentionality allows people to commit and take action in a cooperative manner. In this study we will focus on the application of social sharing in the context of emotions. Affect sharing can involve implicit processes (attachment to the primary attachment figure) but can also refer to the sharing of emotional states in a conscious manner (Colle et al., 2017). This can for example be a shared enthusiasm for a painting or the same disappointment when our team loses the game. To participate in social sharing, high levels of sensitivity and responsiveness are needed to the emotions of someone else. It is sometimes considered to be equivalent to empathy (Colle et al., 2017).

Social sharing also emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connections. If we don't succeed in building these social bonds, we experience problems such as social exclusion (Gao et al., 2021). This has very nefarious consequences for the well-being of an individual (Gao et al., 2021). We need social bonds to thrive in life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); we seek harmony, proximity and love. Research on social isolation (Williams et al., 2013) shows that this does not only result in lower levels of health and wellbeing but also leads to an inhibition of the development of several social, emotional and cognitive skills. In general social interactions, emotions help us overcome social problems such as social exclusion or loss of power (Barrett, 1998; Griffiths & Scarantino, 2009; Keltner & Haidt, 1999).

Studies about social sharing in romantic relationships show that sharing of positive emotional episodes can benefit the quality of intimacy, daily marital satisfaction and longevity (Rimé et al., 2020). Self-disclosure has been found to be a crucial component in the development of romantic relationships (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Emotions can inform us about the status of the relationship goals and result in the motivation towards certain behaviors in the future (Berscheid, 1983). The other person's response plays a crucial role in the interpersonal benefits of sharing. Gable et al. (2004) have found that sharing positive emotion and experiences within romantic relationships may be linked to increased intraindividual benefits such as higher levels of well-being and positive affects but also to increased interindividual benefits. This could imply that sharing positive experiences strengthens the relationship when the listener is able to respond with empathy (Gable et al., 2004). Reacting in this kind of way augments the appreciation and confidence that we have in this person (Gable & Reis, 2010).

## **Relational needs and goals**

Even the most stable and secure romantic partnerships have their ups and downs. Sometimes a little friction promotes a better knowledge and negotiation of partners' wants, as well as increased mutual need satisfaction (Knee et al., 2014). Much of the necessary negotiating between partners in romantic relationships requires that parties be conscious of their own needs and be able to convey these effectively to one other without lying, justifying, criticizing, or blaming each other. Relationship autonomy and need fulfillment are related with beneficial relationship processes and results such as greater understanding and relationship maintaining actions to conflicts and disagreements among couples (Knee et al., 2014). Goal pursuit is a common part of the everyday relationship experience and people place great importance on their personal aims (Vancouver et al., 2014). At the same time, relationship partners have many opportunities to facilitate or obstruct each other's goal pursuits within everyday interactions (Cupach et al., 2011; Park et al., 2011; Brownhalls et al., 2019).

Several models of relational needs and goals are documented in the existing literature. Berscheid's (2010) Relationships Model emphasizes how the interplay of goals and relationships has important consequences for goal pursuit and relationships. Emotions about a relationship partner are thought to be determined by how the other facilitate or obstruct one's goals, such that individuals feel closer to partners who help and meet their goals, and less close to partners who block them. When romantic partners' goals are compatible, the couple will be more successful in their goals and feel more positive emotion toward each other. On the contrary, when romantic partners' goals conflict, the couple will be less successful at their goals and feel more negatively about each other.

More recently, Fiske (2003) with her BUCET framework drew attention to the interconnected goals of belonging, understanding, controlling, enhancing self, and trusting others. First, the goal of belonging leads people to look for others to bond as dyads. Our moods typically benefit from these associations, and our health, adjustment, and wellbeing may suffer if we are deprived of these interpersonal connections. Second, the goal of understanding is instrumental to achieving a sense of belonging since as human beings we need to perceive others accurately to predict their actions and align with them. Moreover, a sense of understanding allows people to feel in control, in turn, other people can promote our sense of certainty by agreeing with our opinions, providing us with social validation. Third, the goal of controlling is evident when individuals strive for competence in their social interactions, often with the goal of assuming leadership or directing the behavior of others. When people feel that their sense of control is threatened, the need appears to grow stronger. Fourth, the goal of

enhancing the self is related to efforts in keeping self-esteem at a high level and to our constant search for self-improvement. Our interactions with other people are crucial to accomplishing this goal. Finally, the goal of trusting others, particularly those close to us, allows to maintain a sense of optimism and interaction with others in a confident manner.

In the couple therapy literature, Emotionally Focused Couple therapists (EFT-C) consider the need for attachment, which refers to one's need for security and connection, as the most central need in intimate relationships (Johnson, 2007). Previous research also documents the role of need fulfillment in intimate relationships. Previous studies, anchored with Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), identified emotional involvement, companionship, security, intimacy, and sex, as essential relational goals in romantic relationships (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Le & Agnew, 2001; Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006).

### **Self-Determination Theory and relational needs**

Within the broader psychological literature, one of the most prominent approaches to the conceptualization of basic psychological needs and goals is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT)(Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT proposes the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as three universal needs that are essential for one's physical and psychological well-being (Chen & Hynar, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2000). The fulfillment of these needs is essential in any particular social context, including intimate relationships (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). Hence, although there are theoretical and empirical grounds for a needs perspective on intimate relationship functioning, an important gap in the literature can be identified. However, researchers have focused on need satisfaction in relationships; little is currently known about the role of need frustration within intimate relationships, especially as compared to need satisfaction. SDT makes an explicit distinction between need satisfaction and need frustration in romantic relationships, as partners can be either supportive or frustrating towards each other's needs.

Conceptually, need satisfaction and need frustration are regarded as separate concepts instead of opposites ends of a continuum (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Relational need frustration involves more actively and directly undermining a partner's needs, as compared to more passively not satisfying one's needs. As delineated by La Guardia and Patrick (2008), frustration of relational needs occurs when partners feel rejected and abandoned by their partner (relatedness frustration), feel controlled or pressured to behave in a

certain way (autonomy frustration), and have induced feelings of failure and doubts (competence frustration).

By contrast, relational need satisfaction involves partners experiencing a successful stable bond with their partner in which they feel loved (relatedness satisfaction), a sense of volition and psychological freedom (autonomy satisfaction), and a feeling of effectiveness and mastery to attain desired goals (competence satisfaction). Fulfillment of basic needs is crucial to increase intrinsic motivation and internalization that, in turn, foster psychological growth and integrity (Ryan et al., 1995). Existing literature have shown that early childhood autonomy and relatedness need supports are linked to the development of intellectual capabilities such as academic engagement and performance (Vasquez et al., 2015), executive functioning (Bindman et al., 2015) and social capacities, including even greater relations with siblings (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015). By contrast, developmental conditions that thwart this needs satisfaction produce not only frustration but also distress (Ryan et al., 2016). Interpersonal support, according to SDT, is essential for satisfying the desire for relatedness since it develops a sense of closeness, affection, and understanding within relationships. The “ups and downs” in everyday emotional experiences and relationship quality fluctuate with swings in need satisfaction (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

In order for partners to succeed in forming high quality intimate relationships, the three previously named needs must be fulfilled (Knee et al., 2014; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). Previous studies, found that each individual need contributed to relationship outcomes, but specifically relatedness tends to be most strongly associated with relational outcomes (Patrick et al., 2007). This can be found in the study of Vanhee et al. (2016b), where higher levels of relatedness satisfaction and lower levels of relatedness frustration both were linked to greater levels of relationship satisfaction. The Self-Determination Theory in addition suggests that people have a tendency to move toward integration on behalf of goal orientation, values and behaviors (Patrick et al., 2007).

### **Need for autonomy**

When the attainment of psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) is supported by the context and individual differences, natural growth processes are facilitated such as intrinsically motivated behavior and the integration of extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The degree to which people are successful in satisfying their basic psychological needs is critical in the effects of goal pursuit and attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The Self-

Determination Theory proposes that when individuals feel autonomous about their goals (Sheldon, 2014) and when they feel like this autonomy is supported by meaningful others in their lives (Williams et al., 2006), they will successfully achieve their goals (Sheldon, 2014). This autonomy is attained when they feel like the goals are self-generated and freely chosen and definitely not determined by external or internal pressures. The autonomous goals usually reflect personal interests and values and involve free will (Koestner et al., 2008). When this autonomy is not attained, thus controlled, the motivation refers to goals that the individual feels obligated to accomplish because of internal or external pressure (Koestner et al., 2008).

Previous studies have demonstrated that satisfaction of the need for autonomy has a crucial role in individual and couple well-being (Carbonneau et al., 2019; Pirrone et al., 2023; Vanhee et al., 2016a). Romantic partners can either promote and nurture autonomy or undermine and threaten it. Intimate others providing choice and empathy have been typically found to be supportive of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987), whereas surveillance (Marshall et al., 2012), giving orders (Bentley et al., 2007), and directives (Righetti et al., 2013) have been associated with controlling a partner.

### **Need for relatedness**

The need for relatedness on the other hand embodies the need to feel personally accepted by and significant to others; to feel cared for but also to take care of others (Deci & Ryan, 2014). It drives us to make interpersonal contacts and to join groups, identify with them in order to socially connect with others. It reflects the need for people to experience a certain sense of belonging, attachment and intimacy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The tendency to be oriented toward forming strong and stable interpersonal bonds is a central aspect in this domain (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Humans are social beings, and therefore it is important to consider that the sense of relatedness, derived from interpersonal experiences, is another essential need for one's physical and psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan et al., 1995; Vanhee et al., 2016a). The need for relatedness refers to the desire to form meaningful and intimate social relationships, care for others and to feel cared for by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In intimate relationships the fulfillment of this need involves a genuine communication of care, interest, focus, and non-contingent support toward one's partner, by experiencing a successful stable bond with the partner in which one feel loved (Knee et al., 2014).

Another way to conceptualize relatedness is via responsiveness. This means that partners provide noncontingent positive regard for the person and a warm and nurturing

environment (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). The concept need for relatedness is also derived from perspectives on intimacy and closeness (Reis & Patrick, 1996). According to Reis & Patrick (1996) intimacy can be understood in terms of feeling understood and validated and research shows that these aspects of intimacy result in optimum psychological and relationship functioning.

The two concepts need for autonomy and need for relatedness are not independent. It is when partners experience autonomy but also at the same time provide autonomy support, that the other partner will experience the satisfaction of the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2013). On the contrary; control, objectification and contingent reward will not only block the fulfillment of the need for autonomy but also the need for relatedness, resulting in poor quality relationships. Both needs predict better dyadic functioning, improved health, higher levels of trust and reliance, resulting in better relationship outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

### **Link between emotion regulation strategies and relational goals**

According to the Self-Determination Theory, need satisfaction is the primary object of life and emotion regulation plays a fundamental role in this need satisfaction. The SDT posits that one's emotion regulation is heavily influenced by parent supports for the basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2013). It is important to be able to integrate difficult situations into our sense of self and meaning; this way we are able to satisfy these basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The emotion regulation strategies are seen as "integrative" in the SDT, based more on their function than on their form. In order to change how something feels, integrative strategies first receptively grant and pay attention to their emotional experiences and their significance, rather than immediately trying to suppress or reframe reappraisals (Roth et al., 2019). This means that strategies can be used in an integrative way, allowing people to view and comprehend their environment in a way that improves their needs. But on the other hand they can also be implemented in a non-integrative way; when they are used to avoid feelings for example. (Benita, 2020, Benita et al., 2017). Several studies also show that need satisfaction is enabled by supportive environments (Gagné, 2003; La Guardia et al., 2000, Ryan et al., 2010). SDT subsequently makes predictions that when this supportive environment is not present and thus unable to satisfy their psychological needs, individuals will seek well-being through other coping such as positive reappraisal. This way, there is a compensation for the lack of need satisfaction (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). An interesting hypothesis was made by Brockman et al. (2023) that "non-integrative strategies would be most



effective if a person was not getting their core psychological needs met”. They found consistent results that support this hypothesis. This means that someone who experiences need satisfaction, only benefits a little from non-integrative emotion regulation strategies. They also found that reappraisal was less strongly associated with positive affect when their autonomy needs were met.

According to the SDT, autonomy is applied not only when dealing with external pressures, prompts and temptations but also when dealing with emotions impulses and urges (Ryan & Deci, 2017). One of the most central processes from within the person supporting autonomous functioning is that of emotion regulation (Ryan et al., 2015). Namaziandost & Heydarnejad’s study (2023) about teachers autonomy and emotion regulation shows that their emotion regulation is strongly influenced by their autonomy. It is possible that attention deployment and reappraisal are core aspects in this correlation; emotion regulation strategies that are typical for autonomous behaviors (Burić et al, 2017; Frenzel et al., 2021). It is possible that learning how to control one’s emotions is an invaluable skill to enhance autonomy. According to the SDT, higher levels of parental autonomy support is linked to higher levels of the children’s autonomy and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2017) while on the other hand psychological control is believed to deprive one’s autonomy associated with emotion dysregulation, undermining their sense of competence and control over their surroundings. Some emotion regulation strategies (e.g. cognitive reappraisal) can be implemented in either controlled or autonomous ways. For example reappraisal can be implemented as a defense mechanism to avoid emotions or it can also be implemented in an authentic and adaptive way.

Little can be found in literature about the link between emotion regulation strategies and relatedness in romantic relationships. Especially the implementation of social sharing and how it may be associated to the fulfillment of relatedness goals remains unknown. There are some studies that research these topics from a different perspective. For example Van der Kaap-Deeder’s et al.’s study (2021) researched how emotion regulation could be linked to borderline personality features. The results showed that emotional dysregulation and emotional suppression may be linked to higher levels of borderline personality features and that need frustration might act as a mediating process underlying these relations. Borderline personality features are often characterized by a constant fear of real or imagined abandonment, mood swings and impulsiveness which can all possibly hinder individual’s capacity to maintain consistent and stable relationships (relatedness frustration) (Van de Kaap-Deeder et al., 2021). Another study about athletes’ basic psychological needs and emotion regulation (Robazza et al., 2023) showed that relatedness need satisfaction might be linked to a more adaptive emotion

regulation style such as cognitive reappraisal, pleasant emotions, psychobiosocial experiences. Results also showed that the fulfillment of relatedness goals is negatively linked to expressive suppression and unpleasant emotions. The link between social sharing and relatedness frustration remains to be uncovered.

### **The present study**

Despite the existing literature being focused on emotion regulation strategies and relational goals separately, the association between these two concepts is still to be explored empirically. Thus, the present study focuses on how specific emotion regulation strategies (positive reappraisal and social sharing) may influence the fulfillment and achievement of specific relational goals (autonomy and relatedness).

With regards to the relational goal of autonomy, because positive reappraisal allows the two partners to cope with emotional events in a flexible manner without internal conflict resulting in the feeling of personal development and independence, we expect that partners' implementation of positive reappraisal will lead to a decrease of their autonomy frustration.

H<sub>1</sub>: Partners reporting higher levels of positive reappraisal during the conflict will experience lower levels of autonomy frustration.

With regards to the relational goal of relatedness, because social sharing allows partners to experience a certain level of understanding and empathy, we expect that partners' implementation of social sharing will lead to a decrease of their relatedness frustration.

H<sub>2</sub>: Partners reporting higher levels of social sharing during the conflict will experience lower levels of relatedness frustration.

Emotional experiences often unfold in ways that highlight not only our own but also the partner's involvement; as social interactions progress, we act and react to behaviors and feelings of our partners, as much as they react to our behaviors and feelings in turn (Butler, 2011). For this reason, the current study also aims to explore cross-partner effects. This means that we exploratively tested if people's emotion regulation strategy was associated with the relational goals frustration of their partner experienced during the interaction.

## METHODS

### Participants

The recruitment strategy was twofold. First, a campaign was spread via radio and via social media recruiting couples that were willing to participate in a research project on intimate relationships. Second, a team of research assistants recruited further participants by means of a network-sampling technique. Couples that expressed interest in the study were informed further about the project and evaluated for their eligibility to participate. The inclusion criteria specified that couples' partners have been involved in a relationship together for at least one year and to have been living together for at least six months.

The final sample consisted of 260 members of 130 Belgian couples (aged 20-71 years,  $M = 27.01$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ), with a range in relationship duration between 6 months and 36 years ( $M = 61.13$ ,  $SD = 83.71$  months). The majority of the participants reported having a Belgian nationality (98.1%), with only 1.9% of participants being immigrants to Belgium. Regarding participants' education level, one had completed primary school, 76 had completed secondary school, 86 held a bachelor's degree, 73 had attained a master's degree, and four reported having a PhD. The study procedures received positive advice from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University.

### Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to fill an internet-based survey at home. Thereafter, each couple was contacted in order to schedule an appointment in our lab for the observational part of the study. The laboratory session was composed of two 10-minute videotaped interaction tasks: a positive and a negative interaction. After every interaction participants were asked to complete a survey regarding their feelings and thoughts during the conversation. At the end of this session, the couple took part in a debriefing with the responsible researcher and was compensated with 30 Euros for their participation in the study.

**Interaction tasks.** The laboratory was set up as a living room and equipped to videotape the couples' interactions. Before starting the interaction task, couples were asked to sign a written informed consent to be filmed. Next, depending on the experimental condition to which each couple was randomly assigned (positive interaction or negative one as first interaction), couples were asked to discuss either the traits they like most about their partner, or the one they

like least. Finally, both partners were instructed to discuss as much as they would do at home when experiencing a similar situation.

## Measures

***Interaction-based extrinsic interpersonal emotions regulation strategies.*** *Positive reappraisal* and *social sharing* emotion regulation strategies were assessed using the related subscales from the Regulation of Self and Others Scale (ROES; MacCann et al., 2023). Participants rated the extent, on a 6-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 6 = *very much*), to which they generally used interpersonal emotion regulation strategies to make their partner feel better. Subscale scores were computed by averaging the two items for each subscale (e.g., “I help my partner to interpreting the situation in a different way”, “I listen to what your partner wanted to tell me”), with higher scores indicating a greater use of the specific strategy. The internal consistency for the positive reappraisal subscale were .74 for man and .78 for women, whereas for the social sharing subscale were .82 for man and .80 for women.

***Interaction-based need frustration.*** At the end of each interaction, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which, during the interaction, they experienced frustration of their need for autonomy (e.g., “I was experiencing a lack of freedom of choice”) and relatedness (e.g., “I was experiencing a lack of relatedness with my partner”) on a 7-point Likert type scale (ranging from 1 = *completely untrue* to 7 = *completely true*). Based on the SDT literature (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000), each item was complemented with examples of each specific need frustration.

## Data analytic strategy

To investigate our research questions, we analyzed the data using multilevel Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM; Kenny, 1996; Kenny et al., 2006). APIMs are used to study dyadic level data in which partners’ responses are non-independent. A person’s variable score is predicted by both his or her own predictor variable score (actor effect) and his or her partner’s predictor variable score (partner effect). Because we were working with partners that were distinguishable by gender, we first fitted models in which the effects of interest and variances could differ across gender, and compared these models with models for indistinguishable dyads (Kenny et al., 2006). Since the fit (as assessed by BIC/AIC<sup>1</sup> values) improved significantly for the distinguishable models, we report the findings for these models.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) are goodness-of-fit measures that are corrected for model complexity (Field, 2009). Models with smaller BIC and AIC values provide a better fit-complexity balance.

We investigated the association between emotion regulation strategy (positive reappraisal, social sharing) and interaction-based need frustration (autonomy, relatedness). In model 1, autonomy frustration was predicted by positive reappraisal (Figure 1), whereas in model 2, relatedness frustration was predicted by social sharing (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Actor-partner interdependence model used to assess the cross-concurrent associations between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration.

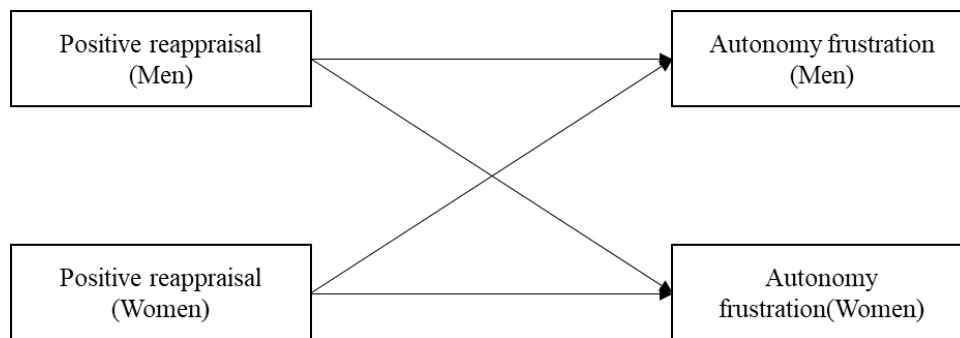
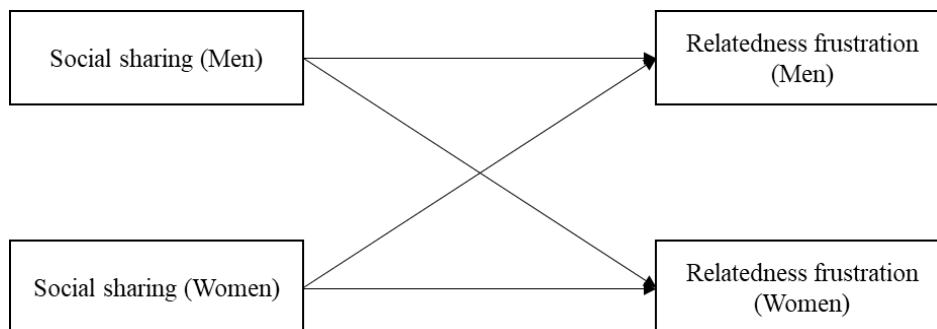


Figure 2. Actor-partner interdependence model used to assess the cross-concurrent associations between social sharing and relatedness frustration.



## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the key variables, along with paired sample t-tests for possible gender differences in these variables, and Pearson correlation coefficients between all the key variables (Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for key variables and results of paired sample t-tests comparing men and women.

	Men (N=130)		Women (N = 130)		t	95% CI
	M	SD	M	SD		
<b>Variables</b>						
Positive reappraisal	2.31	1.60	2.10	1.49	1.761	[-0.10; 0.54]
Social sharing	2.92	1.38	1.91	1.47	2.083	[-0.15; 0.35]
Autonomy frustration	2.38	1.52	2.14	1.53	1.331	[-0.12; 0.59]
Relatedness frustration	1.99	1.40	2.03	1.59	1.048	[-0.39; 0.32]

Note: \* $p < .05$

Table 2. Correlations between key variables.

		1	2	3	4
<b>Principal variables</b>	1. Autonomy frustration	.379**	.595**	-.367**	-.446**
	2. Relatedness frustration	.418**	.200**	-.332**	-.458**
	3. Positive Reappraisal	-.525**	-.338**	.242**	.683**
	4. Social Sharing	-.463**	-.454**	.625**	.404**

Note: Correlations for women are presented above the diagonal, while correlations for men are presented below the diagonal. Correlations between men and women are presented on the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

### Model 1: Positive reappraisal on autonomy frustration

Results showed no significant associations between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration during conflict interactions (actor effect), for both men and women (Table 3). In contrast with our hypothesis ( $H_1$ ), participants (male and female) who reported higher level of positive reappraisal, do not report less autonomy frustration. None of the partner effects between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration were statistically significant.

Table 3. Results for the APIMs predicting autonomy frustration from men’s and women’s positive reappraisal.

<b>Model 1 parameters</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
<i>Intercepts</i>				
Men	1.39	0.06	0.000	[1.27; 1.51]
Women	1.19	0.04	0.000	[1.11; 1.28]
<i>Actor effects</i>				
Positive reappraisal <sub>m</sub> → Autonomy frustration <sub>m</sub>	0.01	0.03	0.837	[-0.05; 0.07]
Positive reappraisal <sub>w</sub> → Autonomy frustration <sub>w</sub>	-0.01	0.02	0.812	[-0.05; 0.04]
<i>Partner effects</i>				
Positive reappraisal <sub>w</sub> → Autonomy frustration <sub>m</sub>	-0.02	0.03	0.602	[-0.08; 0.05]
Positive reappraisal <sub>m</sub> → Autonomy frustration <sub>w</sub>	-0.03	0.02	0.159	[-0.08; 0.01]

### Model 2: Social sharing on relatedness frustration

Results indicated that the association between social sharing and relatedness frustration during conflict interactions (actor effect), was statistically significant for men, but not for women (Table 4). Men who experienced higher levels of social sharing, also reported lower levels of relatedness frustration, thus partially confirming our hypothesis (H<sub>2</sub>). Only the partner effect between women’s social sharing and men’s relatedness frustration was statistically significant, thus indicating that men whose partners experienced high level of social sharing during the interaction, reported less relatedness frustration at the end of the interaction. No partner effect was found between men’s social sharing and women’s relatedness frustration.

Table 4. Results for the APIMs predicting autonomy and relatedness frustration from men’s and women’s positive reappraisal and social sharing.

<b>Model 2 parameters</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
<i>Intercepts</i>				
Men	1.25	0.04	0.000	[1.16; 1.34]
Women	1.21	0.04	0.000	[1.13; 1.28]
<i>Actor effects</i>				
Social sharing <sub>m</sub> → Relatedness frustration <sub>m</sub>	-0.14	0.06	0.013	[-0.26; -0.03]
Social sharing <sub>w</sub> → Relatedness frustration <sub>w</sub>	-0.06	0.04	0.175	[-0.14; 0.03]
<i>Partner effects</i>				
Social sharing <sub>w</sub> → Relatedness frustration <sub>m</sub>	-0.18	0.05	0.001	[-0.28; -0.08]
Social sharing <sub>m</sub> → Relatedness frustration <sub>w</sub>	-0.02	0.05	0.705	[-0.12; 0.08]

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we wanted to research if the use of specific emotion regulation strategies (positive reappraisal and social sharing) may influence the fulfillment of relational goals (autonomy and relatedness). Specifically if positive reappraisal was linked to lower levels of autonomy frustration and if social sharing was linked to lower levels of relatedness frustration.

The results showed that, in contrast with our hypothesis, there were no significant associations between positive reappraisal and autonomy frustration during conflict interactions, both for men and women. Similarly, no partner effects were found for this association. A possible explanation could be that positive reappraisal is not rarely implemented in a non-integrative way. As highlighted before, the SDT posits that when individuals are not surrounded by an environment that meets their needs, it is possible that they will seek well-being through coping such as positive reappraisal. If the use of positive reappraisal is a consequence of the lack of psychological needs, making conclusions about autonomy fulfillment after implementing positive reappraisal could result in a circular conclusion which makes it very difficult to make a causality statement.

Another possible explanation for the absence of significant association between the two variables can be posited in the light of the work Namaziandost and Heydarnejad (2023). They showed that emotion regulation is strongly influenced by the need for autonomy. It might be possible that emotion regulation is influenced by the fulfillment of autonomy goals but not the other way around. That would imply that when individuals' autonomy goals are fulfilled, they will implement more positive reappraisal while the use of positive reappraisal does not automatically result in lower levels of autonomy frustration.

Various other elements can impact the dynamic of these two concepts. For instance, specific personality traits may intervene with the effective and successful implementation of positive reappraisal. Individuals who are less prone to optimism might find a hard time utilizing this emotion regulation strategy. Additionally, conscientiousness may affect their tendency to pursue and accomplish certain goals. Another possible intervening factor is the presence of external stressors. These stressors can manifest as pressure, financial stress, health complications, work obligations, family responsibilities, significant life events... Increased levels of stress can potentially influence an individual's capacity to regulate their emotions and to focus on goal-directed behavior. Social support networks can also influence both the implementation of emotion regulation strategies and goal fulfillment. Feeling supported by



those around us, equips individuals with the necessary resources and encouragement to handle challenging circumstances and to remain motivated to work towards their goals.

The results concerning the link between social sharing and relatedness show that during conflict interactions, the actor effect was statistically significant for men, but not for women. This could imply that when men implement social sharing during conflict, their level of relatedness frustration is lower. This association was not found within the female participant group, thus confirming only partially our hypothesis. According to current gender roles and stereotypes, women are more prone to verbalize their thoughts and feelings and to explicitly communicate how they feel. It is possible that social sharing happens in a more implicit manner without really expressing what goes on inside. Therefore women may only achieve this relatedness goal when communication happens in an explicit manner and it may be imperative to address their frustration more clearly in order to affect their relatedness frustration. Gender roles state that men on the other hand, are not as comfortable as women with communicating their feelings or experiences. They are seen as more rational and assertive and less emotionally-expressive. When they do engage in open communication, men may choose to do so only in circumstances where they experience a sense of ease and connection with the person they are interacting with. Therefore it is possible that men experience a lowering in relatedness frustration when they implement social sharing.

The partner effect between women's social sharing and men's relatedness frustration was also statistically significant, but again, this association was not found in the female participant group. A possible explanation for these findings could be found in extensive literature in the domains of interpersonal communication (Vlăduțescu, 2015; Meeks et al., 1998; Floyd et al., 2022). These numerous studies support the possibility that men perceive a sense of comprehension from their female partner and consequently seek emotional support through their partner's social sharing. It may support men in building and maintaining relationships. This facilitates the reinforcement of these significant interpersonal connections and ensures mutual understanding, resulting in lower levels of relatedness frustration. One could argue that a stereotypical explanation for these results is that men tend to have a very practical mindset. They are typically focused on finding solutions to problems and derive a certain sense of fulfillment from resolving them. Therefore, when their female partners express their opinions and emotions, it allows them to address issues more effectively and attain their goals. Our results show that women on the other hand do not seem to be affected by their partner's social sharing. These are rather contra-intuitive findings because the previously mentioned literature

about interpersonal communication concerns both male and female individuals. It is thus not clear why women do not profit from male partners practicing social sharing.

Also here, women's need for explicit communication could be hypothesized. An alternative theory suggests that women find value not solely in sharing experiences, but also in engaging in active listening. The hypothesis could be proposed that the partner's active listening acts as a mediator in this process. Active listening is a communication technique that involves exhibiting comprehension through both verbal and non-verbal responses. This could for example include back-channeling, such as using expressions like "mm hmm" but also paraphrasing and asking clarification questions. This also comprises of not interrupting or dismissing the women's thoughts and feelings while also being open and communicative. This non-directive approach to communication was first introduced by Gordon (1975) and further researched by Rogers (1951).

### **Limitation and future direction**

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First we investigated the role of emotion regulation strategies in a specific context, a conflict situation. The implementation of social sharing and positive reappraisal could have different relations to goal orientation in another social context. Future research should investigate whether emotion regulation strategies lead to different outcomes in alternative contexts such as for example a more positive climate.

The cross-sectional nature of the study could also be considered a limitation. It is also possible that the decrease in relatedness or autonomy frustration happens in the longer term. Only studying the participants once in a narrow timeframe, reduces the likelihood of seeing impacts on the long term. This would imply that the effect of the implementation of emotion regulation is not clear immediately. Thus in order to be able to make conclusions in the long term, future research should use a longitudinal methodology. Therefore it would be necessary to do several follow-up measures to be able to register this evolution. This approach would allow for an analysis of the long-term effects of certain intrapersonal dynamics in romantic relationships. A longitudinal survey enables the investigation of stability and continuity over time (Farrington, 1991). This implies that the usage of emotion regulation strategies and its impact can be observed across an extended duration and it also facilitates within-individual analyses of individual change (Farrington, 1991). Cross-sectional methodology solely permits to research differences between individuals, while the implementation of a longitudinal approach facilitates the exploration of both changes within individuals and variations between

individuals (Farrington, 1988). Another problem we talked about before, is that of causality. It is not rare that causal effects are derived from differences between individuals rather than within individuals (“gender is a cause of the lowering of relatedness frustration when implementing social sharing”) (Farrington, 1991). However, drawing inferences regarding the effect of change (causes) within individuals, predicated on changes between individuals necessitates a conceptual leap that may not always be warranted. Inter-individual variations may not always align with intra-individual variations. In addition, a longitudinal study effectively controls for the various factors that may influence the dependent variable (Farrington, 1991). The cross-sectional approach inevitably possesses lower internal validity as it lacks the ability to measure and control these potentially confounding factors (Farrington, 1991).

Second, there are several factors that may have influenced the generalizability of the results of our sample. For example, our sample exists primarily of young, heterosexual, Caucasian and highly educated participants. It is then possible that there is a generational difference in terms of emotional awareness. The Generation Z has been educated from a very early age to take both their own emotions and those of others into account as well as to contemplate them. In contrast, previous generations were not taught to monitor their emotional well-being to the same extent, potentially resulting in lower levels of emotional intelligence and awareness. In order to solve the problem of a possible generational gap of emotional awareness, a sample could be drawn in which different age groups are equally represented. Cultural variances are also not evident in this study. It is possible that the predominantly Caucasian sample holds certain cultural norms and values regarding emotion regulation and expression. Goal orientation may also differ significantly among different cultures. For instance, in more collectivist societies (e.g. China), seeking social support might be more prevalent and encouraged compared to individualistic societies (e.g. Western-Europe). Furthermore, another interesting perspective could be to study these concepts in different types of couples’ relationships such as the queer ones. Hence this type of relationship is relatively new, nonetheless rapidly growing, there still has to be a lot of research done concerning this diverse group.

Third, the research questions were investigated in a quantitative way, thus losing possible valuable information about emotional processes. The use of surveys is clear for the participant, require minimal time, can be organized effortlessly and provides us of data that is readily analyzable. However, this methodology could potentially result in a great loss of interesting data. Future research on the emotion regulation strategies and relational goals should use qualitative methodologies, such as (semi)structured interviews. This approach offers

numerous benefits including the ability to maintain focus on a certain topic while also allowing the investigator to autonomously explore pertinent ideas that may come up during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Surveys still hold significance despite the statements above. In fact, by employing a mixed methods approach, interviews can be utilized to augment the comprehensiveness of quantitative data by using surveys and interviews in conjunction (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In this manner, it would enable us to delve further into these subjects and it would facilitate a more comprehensive research of these concepts, enabling their analysis within different contexts.

Although a lot of research studies the need for autonomy, there is still a great gap in literature concerning the domains of relatedness and competence. Specifically in the domain of romantic relationships and the systemic field in relational therapy, the need for relatedness can be a very interesting and fundamental concept worthy of further investigation. Considering the fact that the need for feeling connected and the concept of attachment play a very crucial part in relationships, future research should explore this field thoroughly. The prevalence of divorces in our current society has reached unprecedented levels, with a large increase in the number of individuals seeking couples' therapy (González-Val & Marcén, 2012; Lebow & Snyder, 2022). The findings from a study conducted on expert psychotherapists' predictions about the future of psychotherapy have indicated that couple therapy is most likely to achieve the most growth in the next 10 years (Norcross et al., 2013). Therefore it is crucial that the concept of relatedness is studied more thoroughly.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we found that only men experience a lowering in relatedness frustration when implementing social sharing. This was the case in both actor and partner effect which means that men experience lower levels of relatedness frustration when either them or their partner practices social sharing. This effect could not be found in the female participant group. This concept could serve as a valuable topic in couples' relationship therapy, more specifically focusing on the importance of connection and assessing the level to which it is present in the romantic relationship. If there are evident challenges in feeling related to each other, it could present an opportunity to enhance their communication abilities in therapy. This intervention could improve maladaptive couple dynamics in which partners become entangled. By facilitating a process of reflection on their relational patterns and analysis of negative interactions, it enables a deeper comprehension of their behavior and intentions, ultimately leading to an improvement in their overall mutual understanding.



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