



Emotion Regulation in Intimate Relationships

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Intimate relationships are one of the most important social relationships in the lives of many people. According to the US census, 96% of US adults over the age of 65 have been married at least once in their life.

Social relationships in general (Butler, 2011; Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011) and intimate relationships in particular (Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2013) are hotbeds of emotions. Navigating these complex socioemotional landscapes requires considerable regulatory efforts. In fact, the vast majority of emotion regulation episodes takes place in social contexts (reports suggest up to 98%; Gross, Richards, & John, 2006).

Although emotion regulation is a blooming research topic (e.g., Gross, 2013), most studies have focused on emotion regulation in individuals. In a review of studies conducted since 2001, Campos and colleagues (2011) estimated that less than 12% of the studies assessed emotion regulation in the presence of another person (and this is an optimistic estimate, including studies involving imagined as well as real others).

The present article takes a (selective) look at emotion regulation in intimate relationships, zooming in on defining qualities, reviewing key developmental periods, highlighting consequences, presenting some of our recent empirical findings, and outlining suggestions for future research and applications.

Defining qualities

Most existing definitions emphasize individual emotion regulation focusing, for example, on “the processes by which *individuals* [emphasis added] influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Clearly, there are aspects of emotion regulation that are relevant for both individuals and couples. In individuals and couples, emotion regulation can be explicit (effortful) or implicit (automatic) (Gyurak, Gross, & Etkin, 2011), successful or unsuccessful (Gross & Levenson, 1993), and in both contexts it can be difficult to distinguish between emotion reactivity and emotion regulation (Gross, Sheppes, & Urry, 2011).

However, emotion regulation in couples also has a number of defining, special qualities (Levenson et al., 2013). Emotion regulation in couples is (a) *dynamic and iterative* as couples engage in an ongoing emotional dance with partners acting and reacting to each other’s emotion. Emotion regulation in couples is (b) *bidirectional* as couples engage in both down- and upregulation of emotions

(although downregulating emotion is important, spouses can become quite frustrated when their partner engages in constant downregulation). Emotion regulation in couples is (c) *bivalent* as couples’ regulation may target both negative and positive emotion (upregulating positive and downregulating negative emotion are important, but downregulating positive and upregulating negative emotion may be critical, for example when one partner needs support and consolation; Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987). Finally, emotion regulation in couples is *co-regulatory* (a partner may regulate not only their own but also their partner’s emotions and both partners may have quite different regulatory goals, strategies, and blind spots). Clearly, some of these qualities (e.g., bidirectionality, bivalence) are also important for individuals, but they may become crucial in intimate relationships.

To illustrate these defining qualities, consider a couple who is driving to visit the husband’s family over the holidays. As the wife is driving, the husband is starting to get excited to see his family. His wife, however, wants to concentrate on the drive, which in turn starts to irritate the husband (*dynamic and iterative regulation*). He says to her: “Can’t you just relax and enjoy yourself a little bit?” (*attempted co-regulation*). The wife remains silent, takes a couple of deep breaths to calm herself down, and continues driving (*downregulating negative emotion*). The husband tries hard to keep a cheerful look on his face (*upregulating positive emotion*) when the wife suddenly turns to him and says: “I would love to be excited, but it’s just hard for me. When we visit your family, I start thinking of my own family and . . .”; she starts to tear up (*upregulating negative emotion*). Suddenly realizing that his wife is really sad, the husband says: “I understand, honey. I am sorry. How about we stop somewhere and get something to eat?” She smiles, nods, and turns up a song that he likes on the radio (*mutual co-regulation*).

Development across the life span

We are part of many intimate relationships throughout the life span. We focus here on three dyadic relationships that are key for the development of emotion regulation, parent-infant relationships, early romantic relationships, and intimate relationships in late life.

Parent-infant relationship. The parent-infant relationship is the cradle of emotion regulation. As emotion regulation skills are just beginning to develop, infants rely primarily on their caregivers to regulate their emotions (Thompson, 1991). The focus is often on downregulating negative emotion (e.g., managing distress), but upregulating positive emotion (e.g., engaging in amusing and calming activities) is fundamental as well (e.g., Tronick, 1989). If all goes well, successful regulation of emotion in the

parent-infant dyad sets the stage for infants' development of their own emotion regulation skills.

Attachment theory and research (Bowlby, 1988) reminds us that parent-infant dyads greatly differ in their attachment styles and, accordingly, in their capacity for emotion regulation. The "Strange Situation" paradigm (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) uses observation of mother-infant separation episodes (analyzing infants' separation anxiety, exploration, stranger anxiety, and reunion behavior) to classify attachment styles and sheds light on how deeply attachment and emotion regulation are intertwined. Securely attached infants are distressed when the mother leaves, but easily soothed and happy when she returns; insecurely attached infants are not. Exciting longitudinal research has documented the implications of parent-infant attachment for long-term developmental outcomes including emotion regulation in intimate relationships later in life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Sroufe, Coffino, & Carlson, 2010).

Early romantic relationships. Choosing a romantic partner and starting an intimate relationship have traditionally been regarded as developmental tasks of young adulthood (Havighurst, 1976). However, individuals may enter romantic relationships throughout the life span (i.e., 14% of US singles between age 57 and 85 are dating; Brown & Shinohara, 2013).

The early stages of a romantic relationship often focus on upregulating positive emotions such as passionate love, affection, and excitement (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). Romantic love has been coined a "mammalian system for mate choice" (Fisher, Aron, & Brown, 2006) and is associated with feelings of euphoria, obsessive thinking about and craving for connection with the partner; expanded sense of self; and increased energy (Aron, Fisher, Mashek, Strong, Li, & Brown, 2005; Aron & Aron, 1996), which may assume an almost addictive quality (Aron et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2006). Downregulating negative emotion is important for couples at all stages of development with managing jealousy thought to be particularly critical for early romantic relationships.

Relationships in late life. As individuals grow older, they face many new challenges; earlier sources of meaning (e.g., family building, career choice) may no longer be as relevant (Erikson, 1950); social networks become smaller (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2012); physical abilities and health may become impaired (albeit with considerable individual differences, Rowe & Kahn, 1997); and cognitive functioning may decline (Salthouse, 2004). However, numerous aspects of emotional functioning are preserved or even enhanced in late life, with (aspects of) emotion regulation being a prime example (Gross, Carstensen, Pasupathi, Tsai, Skorpen, & Hsu, 1997; Shiota & Levenson, 2009).

Socioemotional selectivity theory (e.g., Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) posits that, as time horizons shrink, older adults prioritize emotion regulation (i.e., upregulating positive and downregulating negative emotions) over other goals. Positive emotions have soothing effects (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), which may be one reason for why they become so important in late life. Intimate relationships in turn are key for emotion regulation in late life, enhancing positive emotions such as affection and reducing negative emotions such as fear (Coan & Maresh, 2013).

Consequences

Emotion regulation matters for many developmental outcomes including well-being, mental health, physical health, and social functioning (e.g., Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Côté, Gyurak, & Levenson, 2010; Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004; Lopes, Salovey, Cote, Beers, & Petty, 2005; Nelis et al., 2011).

A number of studies have examined consequences of emotion regulation in couples (most interesting perhaps when looking at actual couples' interactions) for individual (e.g., cognition; Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003) as well as relationship (e.g., spousal abuse; McNulty & Hellmuth, 2008; marital satisfaction; Smith, Cribbet, Nealey-Moore, Uchino, Williams, MacKenzie, & Thayer, 2011) outcomes. One laboratory-based paradigm has looked at the simple act of spouses holding hands and documented its threat-reducing effects, especially in happily married couples (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006).

Another laboratory-based paradigm (Levenson & Gottman, 1983) has also provided insights into the consequences of couples' emotion regulation. In this paradigm, couples engage in several unrehearsed 15-minute conversations on relationship topics (e.g., events of the day, area of disagreement, pleasant topic). During these conversations, a number of physiological measures (e.g., heart rate, skin conductance) are measured continuously from both partners. Couples are videorecorded so that trained raters can code their emotional behavior later. After the conversations, partners view these videotapes and use a rating dial to indicate how positive or negative they felt (Gottman & Levenson, 1985). These streams of continuous multi-method data (physiology, behavior, subjective experience) can be used to create measures of emotion reactivity and regulation for the individual partners as well as the couple.

Studies utilizing this paradigm show how the regulation of (a) physiology (e.g., low levels of physiological arousal and physiological linkage; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Levenson & Gottman, 1985); (b) emotional behavior (e.g., high ratio of positive to negative emotional behaviors; Gottman & Levenson, 1992), and (c) subjective experience (e.g., negative emotional experience by one partner followed by negative emotional experience by the other partner; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Levenson & Gottman, 1985) predicts greater marital happiness and/or lower risk for divorce.

New findings from a 20-year longitudinal study of marriage

I want to highlight some findings from a 20-year longitudinal study of long-term married middle-aged and older couples directed by Robert W. Levenson, Laura L. Carstensen, and John M. Gottman. In this study, couples visited the laboratory to engage in a series of unrehearsed 15-minute conversations in 1989/1990 and were followed up longitudinally over 20 years. This study has produced a rich body of findings (e.g., Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). Important earlier studies demonstrated the power of couples' emotion regulation for predicting concurrent relationship outcomes. Less escalation of negative emotional behavior was found to be associated with higher marital satisfaction (Carstensen,



Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Greater levels of physiological soothing were associated with higher positive emotional behavior (Yuan, McCarthy, Holley, & Levenson, 2010).

More recently, we have been able to start analyzing longitudinal associations utilizing these data. We (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, in press) developed a new performance-based measure of emotion regulation by determining how *quickly* spouses reduce signs of negative emotion in experience, behavior, and physiological arousal after negative emotion events during the marital conflict discussion. Our findings show that greater downregulation of wives' negative experience and negative behavior predicted greater marital satisfaction for wives and husbands concurrently. Moreover, greater downregulation of wives' negative behavior predicted positive changes in wives' marital satisfaction over time. Wives' use of constructive communication mediated the longitudinal associations. These results demonstrate the benefits of wives' downregulation of negative emotion for marital satisfaction and highlight wives' constructive communication as a mediating pathway. Interestingly and defying common stereotypes, wives and husbands did not differ in their actual ability to downregulate emotion; the gender difference emerged in whether emotion regulation mattered for marital satisfaction or not, suggesting that women may be perceived as the emotional centers of the marriage (at least in these cohorts). In another study, we (Holley, Haase, & Levenson, 2013) analyzed changes in demand-withdraw behaviors in this sample over a 13-year period and found stability in most behaviors and increases in avoidance behaviors (e.g., diverting attention or changing topics). We interpret this finding as reflecting couples' capacity for greater disengagement from conflict as they are growing older (cf. Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch, 2013a; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010).

We are currently exploring longitudinal links between emotion regulation and outcomes beyond relationship satisfaction. Initial findings suggest that wives' and husbands' ability to downregulate negative emotion predicts anxiety and depression longitudinally above and beyond marital satisfaction (Haase, Bloch, & Levenson, 2014, April). Other analyses are currently underway, examining age-related changes in positive and negative emotional behavior and links between emotion and empathy. Moreover, we have studied how genetic polymorphisms moderate the association between emotion and long-term changes in marital satisfaction (Haase et al., 2013b).

Future directions

We need more research on emotion regulation in social relationships in general and couples in particular. This research will provide exciting insights into the nature of emotion regulation, its development, consequences, and sources; and it has tremendous potential for informing applications.

First, studies are needed that go beyond self-report measures to assess actual emotion regulation in couples by examining multiple response systems (e.g., subjective experience, emotional behavior, language, autonomic and central physiology) and collecting data in the laboratory as well as in the field. These studies may be particularly

interesting if they capture the dynamic, iterative, and co-regulatory qualities of couples' emotion regulation, probe not only downregulation but also upregulation, and pay attention to the regulation of both positive and negative emotion.

Second, more research is needed on the *development*, looking at both *change and continuity*, of emotion regulation in couples across the life span. It will be greatly interesting to learn more about how couples' emotion regulatory styles and skills develop over time, when they are malleable, and when they become stable.

Third, more research is needed on the *consequences* of emotion regulation, with special attention given to linking different kinds of emotion regulation with different kinds of outcomes (examining not only relationship stability and quality but also individuals' well-being, mental health, and physical health).

Fourth, more research is needed on the *sources* of emotion regulation in couples, looking both at biological (e.g., genetic, temperamental) and psychological (e.g., personality, attachment history) factors that predispose individuals and couples to develop particular regulatory styles.

Finally, we believe that this research can inform as well as benefit from couples' counseling and therapy. Couples who struggle often struggle with regulating emotions, be it with downregulating negative emotion (e.g., fights over money, child rearing, in-laws) or with upregulating positive emotions (e.g., loss of intimacy, sexual interest, joy). Couples therapies often zoom in on the non-emotional aspects of these problems, addressing early experiences, individual psychopathology, or communication problems. While these factors are clearly important, addressing emotion and emotion regulation in the couple may be a particularly fruitful point of entry for intervention (see, for example, our finding that better emotion regulation predicts improvements in communication for wives; Bloch et al., in press). There are a number of therapeutic approaches that afford particular attention to emotion (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Lebow, Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012). More cross-talk between researchers and practitioners may be greatly informative.

In sum, the potential is enormous and we are looking forward to future research on emotion regulation in intimate relationships.

Author note

This article draws from a recent chapter written by Robert W. Levenson, myself, Lian Bloch, Sarah Holley, and Benjamin J. Seider (Levenson et al., 2013).

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