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# Emotional Dynamics in Intimate Relationships

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## Abstract

Forming intimate relationships is a fundamental human motive. Emotions play a critical role in intimate relationships—they are central to the development and maintenance of these bonds, and these very bonds can influence both individual and interpersonal emotional dynamics across time. Investigating emotional dynamics in an interpersonal context provides unique insight into the functioning of intimate relationships and, at the same time, provides a window into the interdependence of partners' daily experiences. Reviewing a selection of the literature involving emotional dynamics in intimate relationships, we explore how intimate relationships shape partner's emotional experiences and the implications this may have for their relationship across time.

## Keywords

affect change, emotional coregulation, emotional dynamics, emotional transmission, intimate relationships

Intimate relationships are evolutionally important for survival and procreation, therefore building relationships can be considered a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Emotions play a central role in the development and maintenance of our interactions with our intimate partners. Specifically, emotions motivate us to establish intimate bonds, guide and coordinate our subsequent interactions, and communicate our needs to our partner (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Moreover, how we experience the availability and reliability of our intimate partner is immediately relevant to our well-being. In this way, intimate relationships shape our emotional dynamics, providing us not only with plenty of opportunities to experience positive and negative emotions, but also with important means to regulate emotions emerging from sources internal and external to the relationship (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Because intimate relationships are characterized by high physical, cognitive, and emotional closeness between partners, and by mutuality and exclusiveness, over time, our emotional experiences often become interconnected with our partner's. Given this, studying emotional dynamics between intimate partners provides unique insight into the development

and process of intimate relationships, and likewise, a window into the interpersonal realm of emotional experience.

Major theoretical frameworks and some empirical work contribute to the relatively small literature on emotional dynamics in intimate relationships. Several relationship theories have addressed overall affective responses in intimate interactions (e.g., Bowlby, 1988), whereas some literature has specifically focused on how these relationships may contribute to the down-regulation (or amplification) of stress, and positive or negative emotions (Beckes & Coan, 2011; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zaki & Williams, 2013). An important, partially overlapping, literature has focused on the experiences and expressions of emotions as important ingredients to interactions between intimate partners, particularly regarding their implications for individual and interpersonal functioning (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Gottman, 1993; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Finally, recent work has begun to focus on the interdependence in partners' emotional changes, examining dyadic patterns in emotional dynamics (e.g., Helm, Sbarra, & Ferrer, 2012; Randall & Butler, 2013; Sadler, Ethier, Gunn, Duong, & Woody, 2009; Schoebi, 2008).

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Our review addresses two key questions underlying the association between intimate relationships and emotional dynamics: (a) how do intimate relationships shape each partner's emotional experiences? and (b) how do partners' interpersonal emotional experiences impact their intimate relationship? For each of these questions, we present theoretical perspectives and empirical literature that highlight the importance of considering emotional dynamics in an interpersonal dyadic context. We conclude this review by offering innovative directions for future research.

## How Do Intimate Relationships Shape Partners' Emotional Experiences?

Intimate relationships represent a major influence in shaping our emotional states as we navigate our daily life. Emotional states fluctuate when a situation is appraised to be relevant to our goals and concerns (Nezlek, Vansteelandt, van Mechelen, & Kuppens, 2008). Many of these situations involve other individuals, and particularly intimate partners, because the actions and conditions of close others frequently have major implications for one's own well-being (Reis, 2012). Both relationship-oriented trait (e.g., attachment) and state (e.g., conflict) variables combine to shape emotional dynamics. At the trait level, individual differences exist in the extent and nature of emotional responding to particular interpersonal situations or events. At the situational level, significant interactions with a partner, such as conflicts (e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1983), disappointment, surprises, or rejection (e.g., Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003), may elicit positive or negative emotions.

### *Relationship Appraisals and Emotions*

Theories on intimate relationships conceptualize how interdependent actions and their appraisal shape affective experience and related relationship behaviors. The *emotion in relationships model* (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001) assumes that people develop routines to navigate their daily lives without special effort. Intimate partners' routines tend to be highly interdependent, and involve anticipation of partner's behaviors to fulfill daily tasks and attain one's goals. Unexpected events can interrupt our daily routines, which can interfere with or help to facilitate progress to a specific behavioral goal. When this occurs, emotional arousal and attentional shift are elicited. For example, Knobloch (2008) examined videotaped conversations, and found that interference elicited unfavorable appraisals and negative emotional reactions. Appraisals may be of particular importance in such situations. Attributions of responsibility to an intimate partner may play a key role for the elicitation of negative affect, particularly anger, in intimate relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987). Relationship-oriented appraisals may also play a particularly important role. For example, Sanford and Grace (2011) examined affect fluctuations across weekly reports of relationship conflict, and found that perceptions of threat and neglect in the relationship went along with increases in negative affect. An interesting aspect of this study

is that perceptions of the partner's emotions predicted within-person variability in appraisals, with perceived anger predicting threat appraisals, and perceptions of indifference predicting increased neglect appraisals, but perceptions of sadness, or disappointment predicting decreased neglect appraisals. Moreover relationship threat and neglect appraisals acted as mediators of within-dyad connections between perceptions of the partner's and the own emotional states.

Relationship threat appears as an important emotion-eliciting theme, and some individuals seem to regulate closeness in their relationships in a way that proactively regulates their emotional dynamics. Risk regulation strategies are activated in situations that indicate relationship threat or provide opportunities for self-disclosure and intimacy, in order to minimize experiences of rejection and therefore to avoid or dampen hurt feelings and related negative emotions. The *risk regulation model* provides a framework for understanding when partners adjust their relationship behaviors to manage competing demands of self-protection and openness towards a partner, while risking rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). For example, in a diary study over 28 days, Murray et al. (2003) found that individuals who felt less positively regarded by their partner were more reactive to the partner's negative mood and behaviors, showing increases in hurt feelings across days, and in turn, these increased hurt feelings predicted increases in anger toward their partners in those women who felt less valued. This model highlights the link between an individual's emotional dynamics and individual differences in interpersonal behaviors—individuals who are likely to show increases in anxiety about their relationships in critical situations intensify their self-protective behaviors in response to their rising anxiety levels, and their behavioral adjustment serves to attenuate anxiety.

### *Individual Differences*

*Attachment theory* (Bowlby, 1988) considers individual differences to be part of the cognitive schemas individuals develop of themselves and others, and carry them across the life-span. The attachment system is proposed to ensure establishing a connection to a primary caregiver or an intimate partner in situations of need or threat, and it emphasizes the centrality of partners' emotions in the interpersonal regulation of this goal (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). *Adult attachment theory* maintains that individual differences in affective and behavioral responding to relational situations reflect mental representations built from significant interpersonal experiences in prior relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Such differences are commonly differentiated along two dimensions, anxiety and avoidance, with low levels of anxiety and avoidance reflecting secure attachment. Insecure attachment characterized by high anxiety lowers the thresholds and the sensitivity of perceiving relationship events as critical, and shapes the way we respond to and cope with these events in terms of activating (anxiety) or deactivating (avoidance) responses. High-anxious attachment contributes to emotional reactivity to potential relationship threats, whereas a secure attachment fosters emotional stability.

Evidence from a longitudinal study supports this view, showing that secure attachment in childhood translated into social competence and secure relationships with close friends in adolescence, and more positive and less negative affect observed during interactions in adult romantic relationships (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007).

Diamond and Hicks (2005) suggest that insecure attachment (attachment anxiety) may contribute to more negative affect because of heightened distress reactivity and less efficient recovery from anger. Indeed, research has found a link between attachment insecurity and greater emotional reactivity during interpersonal interactions (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). Observations of couples' problem-solving interactions in a laboratory setting found greater cortisol reactivity—a physiological component of the stress response—in less secure individuals, as compared to securely attached individuals. These results suggest that the vulnerability associated with insecure attachment, extended to the emotional dynamics of the partner; men with an insecure partner showed lower stress reactivity than those with a secure partner.

In addition to insecure attachment, low self-esteem or high sensitivity to social rejection were found to go along with increased reactivity to negative or ambiguous relationship situations (e.g., Campbell, Chew, & Scratchley, 1991; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Importantly, however, such characteristics may also contribute to blunted reactivity to critical relational situations when individuals engage in self-protection strategies. For example, individuals high in attachment avoidance were found to be less reactive to the partner's transgressions (e.g., Feeney, 2005), and across daily reunions, rejection sensitive individuals showed attenuated responses to positive and negative expectancies of the partner's affect when reuniting at the end of the workdays (Schoebi, Perez, & Bradbury, 2012). These relationship-oriented traits may reflect vulnerabilities that jeopardize important benefits of relationships and increase emotional instability.

### *Relationships as Regulators*

Regular contact and proximity with a close partner will increase the availability of the social provisions and can act as a buffer against the perturbations of major and minor daily stressors, dampening the dynamics of stress-related emotions. *Stress buffering* refers to the phenomena whereby the presence of supportive others can buffer the stress response (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Stress buffering can occur in at least two ways: (a) attenuating the stress appraisal response by intervening between the stressful event and stress reaction, or (b) reducing the stressful reaction by intervening between the experience of stress and the onset of psychological distress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Along similar lines, the *social baseline theory* (Beckes & Coan, 2011) posits the proximity and availability of close others is sufficient to attenuate or modulate distress under threatening conditions, and entering into contact or managing proximity to close others can therefore serve as a cost-effective way to help regulate negative emotions, especially in the presence of a romantic partner. Experienced contact with another person through holding hands buffered the stress response during anticipation of a mild shock,

particularly when the other person was the partner in satisfied relationships (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006).

As intimate relationships contribute to each partner's individual emotional experience, romantic partners are frequently in a position to regulate each other's emotional experiences (Butler & Randall, 2013; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Specifically, the regulation of emotional responses through experiencing interpersonal connectedness likely resonates with both partners' momentary emotional experience, even if the interaction is targeted to benefit only one person. For example, studying daily emotional states and interactions of partners in committed relationships, Debrot, Schoebi, Perez, and Horn (2013) found that touching a partner in a responsive way not only improved the partner's momentary emotional state, but also that of the touch provider, and these increases in emotional states were explained by increases of felt intimacy in both partners (Debrot et al., 2013).

### *Summary*

Thus far we have presented theory and evidence of how intimate relationship shape partners' interpersonal emotional experiences. It is important to note that different patterns of these experiences have been examined in the literature. For example, phenomena reflecting connected emotional dynamics between partners have been termed *emotional contagion* (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) or *emotional transmission* (Larson & Almeida, 1999), and refer to an almost immediate (contagion) or temporally contingent (transmission) spreading of emotional states from one partner to the other. A more detailed conceptual differentiation of interpersonal emotion dynamics is provided in Butler (2011, 2015). Empirical literature has examined the connection in partners' changing emotions at the dyad level for positive and particularly negative emotions (e.g., Saxbe & Repetti, 2010; Song, Foo, & Uy, 2008). This research may represent a promising, proximal and change-sensitive approach to study interpersonal functioning, complementing research based on behavioral descriptors of interpersonal interactions. For example, Saxbe and Repetti (2010) found that covariance between spouses' moment-to-moment changes in negative mood and cortisol was particularly prevalent in couples with low relationship satisfaction. In sum, while important relational dispositions and experiences leave their traces in partners' emotional experience, a change-sensitive component in all meaningful interpersonal interactions, connection, or coordination of these dynamics at the dyadic level offers insight into interpersonal dynamics.

## **How Do Partners' Intra and Interpersonal Emotional Dynamics Affect Intimate Relationships?**

Partners' emotional connectedness is an important characteristic of intimate relationships that is fueled by intense interactions while building and maintaining or dissolving intimate bonds (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Daily exchanges between intimate

partners help to promote and maintain closeness and intimacy by responding to emotional disclosure (*intimacy process model*; Reis & Shaver, 1988). During these exchanges, partners may engage in an emotional dance: Each partner's emotional responses emphasize and communicate their individual needs and concerns in the relationship, while their partner's responses provide feedback on the quality of the relationship and guide further interaction and relationship outcomes. For example, expressions and disclosures of feelings, concerns, or needs should prompt a supportive and empathic response from the partner, and, if the partner adequately perceives these disclosures, they will respond in a way that conveys understanding, validation, and care. These experiences are thought to accumulate over time, and create and maintain a sense of trust and intimacy in the relationship. *Capitalization theory* applies the key ideas regarding the importance of responsiveness to positive experiences and emotions (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Sharing positive experiences with one's partner is beneficial when the partner reacts positively (active/constructive), but can be detrimental if the partner reacts passively or destructively. Examining momentary assessments across several days, the authors found that both the communication of positive events to the partner and the perceptions of (constructive) responsiveness by the partner were significant predictors of daily reports of positive, but not negative affect. In an event-sampling study over a 2-week period, Oishi and colleagues found that positive affect fluctuated across social interactions as a function of perceptions of being understood (Oishi, Koo, & Akimoto, 2008). Although not explicitly examined from an intimacy process perspective, the role of correspondence between expression or disclosure of affective contents and the partner's contingent responses is likely to foster interdependent emotion dynamics.

### Support Provision

Emotional dynamics may also facilitate (or interfere with) and establish specific relationship functions, such as support provision. Providing emotional support assumes the type of interaction sequence defined by the intimacy process model and involves both partners' behaviors (e.g., support solicitation and support provision). To be efficient, down-regulation of negative emotions may require the partner to be responsive. At the same time, changes in emotional states may help to facilitate correspondence in support interactions. Partners' perceptions of affective changes may signal a partner's need and elicit supportive behaviors from the nonstressed partner. For example, the pain of women suffering from metastatic breast cancer elicited partner support to the extent that this pain had negative effect on the women's mood (Badr, Laurenceau, Schart, Basen-Engquist, & Turk, 2010). Therefore, emotions may help to coordinate support provisions at the right time (Neff & Karney, 2005), but when partners fail or avoid to be responsive, negative emotions may increase.

It is important to note that partners' interdependent emotion dynamics do not need to be of the same emotional tone, just as responsive behaviors are supposed to be complementary to the disclosure of a concern rather than confirming the same con-

cern. For example, intimate partners who generally described their interactions with the partner to be marked by high responsiveness, showed more decreases of sadness and anxiety contingent on their partner's prior positive emotions measured four times a day over 10 days, whereas those who reported less general responsiveness did not (Randall & Schoebi, 2015).

## Discussion

This review was organized around two important questions: (a) how do intimate relationships shape partners' individual emotional experiences, and (b) how do partners' emotional dynamics affect their relationship? The associations addressed by these questions should not be considered independent, but as two aspects of a complex system in which two individuals' emotional processes are interconnected, and mediate individual and relationship functioning. In reviewing emotion-relevant theories on intimate relationships, a common theme emerged: individuals develop relationship-specific standards or expectancies based on experiences in their relationships across the life-span, and these cognitive schemas shape emotional and behavioral reactions to significant relationship events. Important experiences at the core of such schemas refer to how our partner responds when we communicate and regulate basic needs during our interactions with them. When these experiences reflect coordinated and positive exchanges, we develop cognitive schemas and expectations that serve as relationship resources (intimacy, attachment security, self-esteem, emotional capital, trust, perceived social support, relationship satisfaction), and these resources can help to buffer negative emotional responses to individual and interpersonal stressors and foster the exchange of positive emotions. If these experiences are negative, vulnerabilities may result (insecure attachment, relationship distress) that undermine open and positive exchange and exacerbate negative emotional responding. Our own individual emotional dynamics play a role in coordinating such exchanges, and likewise, resources and vulnerabilities influence the way we enter intimate interactions and respond to potential threat, shaping our emotional experiences and contributing to patterns of emotional dynamics with our intimate partner.

### Future Directions

Given the importance of understanding emotional dynamics in the context of intimate relationships, we see many fruitful areas for future research. First, a better understanding of individual emotion dynamics, particularly those associated with moderators of interpersonal connections will help to better understand interpersonal dynamics by inspiring hypotheses about the mechanisms at play. Although some findings on moderators of emotional connection have emerged, involving factors such as cultural values (Randall, Corkery, Duggi, Kamble, & Butler, 2011; Schoebi, Wang, Ababkov, & Perrez, 2010), genotype (Schoebi, Way, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012), or time spent with the partner (Papp, Pendry, Simon, & Adam, 2013), this knowledge has not been well integrated and in particular, the mechanisms that

determine how partners' feelings become connected await further insight. Second, despite accumulating data on momentary emotional states of partners in intimate relationships and recent developments in the study of partners' emotional dynamics (see Butler, 2011, for a review), there is still a dearth of literature that takes into account not only the frequency or intensity of partners' emotional experience, but also the changes of partners' emotional states over time, and their relational correlates. One reason for this may be due to a lack of well-documented and easily accessible models to capture couples' temporal interpersonal emotion dynamics. Therefore, boosting the development and accessibility of analytic tools that are tailored to the substantive needs is necessary to advance the field. Hamaker, Ceulemans, Grasman, and Tuerlinckx (2015) provide an overview over actual approaches to address different analytic goals in modelling affect dynamics over time, and Butler (2015) outlines some promising developments for data from dyads and groups.

For applications in the context of intimate relationships, measuring interdependence between individual processes at the dyadic level, and linking these measures with both momentary and stable individual and relational outcomes must be a major goal (Randall, Post, Reed, & Butler, 2013). Therefore, beyond the actual empirical assessment of interpersonal emotion dynamics, both the relationships literature and the emotion literature await further incorporation of features of emotional dynamics into larger substantive areas of scholarship. Important examples are individual characteristics in emotional dynamics: the degree of emotional rigidity or flexibility of a person may have important implications for interpersonal interaction, and shape the course and outcomes of intimate processes (see also Hollenstein, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Potworowski, 2013).

## Conclusion

Emotional dynamics play a central role in intimate interactions. The reviewed literature suggests that interdependence in emotional dynamics becomes particularly salient when partners satisfy and negotiate individual and social needs in the context of a relationship. Intimate relationships provide a context for emotional experiences, and partners' emotional experiences shape the nature of their interactions. These interactions, in turn, influence intimate partners' evaluations and expectancies of their relationship, ultimately setting the stage for new emotional responses in future relationships events. In this process, changes in emotional experience are of pivotal importance, as the (lack of) coordination in emotional change between intimate partners is what renders interdependence meaningful. As relationships can only be observed through their effects (Berscheid, 1999), emotional dynamics of the partners and their coordination in the couple should be considered as one of the most proximal domains flagging important relationship processes or functions. For instance, the contributions of intimate relationships on emotion regulation or dysregulation could be complemented in important ways by studying the dyadic component of intimate partners' emotional dynamics, extending the insight provided by traditional

self-reported and observed accounts of emotion regulation taken from behavioral coding. New work on mother–child dyads, for example, points to potentially relevant processes, showing that the mother's distress may strengthen affective connection in the dyad (Waters, West, & Mendes, 2014), or that a child's positive affect is sustained through contact with parents (Bai, Repetti, & Sperling, 2014). Taking such steps requires incorporating research on interpersonal emotional dynamics into experimental or longer term longitudinal designs, as predictors or outcomes of relationship development. Given the importance of intimate relationship experiences on indices of mental health (Whisman & Baucom, 2012), incorporation of interpersonal emotion dynamics may also enrich the literature on individual well-being and psychopathology (e.g., Randall & Schoebi, 2015; see also Trull, Lane, Koval, & Ebner-Priemer, 2015; Wichers, 2015). In this way, antecedents of change in interpersonal emotion dynamics, and also their putative consequences, become a possible subject of analysis for a wide range of outcomes.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

None declared.

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