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# Emotions and Emotion Regulation in Family Relationships

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**Abstract**: Research shows that emotions and emotion regulation strategies are important variables for family functioning. The aim of the present article was to review the literature on the role of emotions and emotion regulation in couple relationships and parent-child interaction. The paper presents the most important theoretical models on emotions and family functioning and provides an overview of research investigating the association of positive emotions, negative emotions and emotion regulation with family relationships outcomes. First, we provided an overview on the functionality and social function of positive and negative emotions. Second, we investigated the role of positive and negative emotions in couple relationship and parent-child interaction. Third, we emphasized the role of specific intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies in couple relationships. Finally, we outlined the role of parents in child's emotional development. The conclusions of our review support the importance of including emotions and emotion regulation strategies in counselling programs for couples and families.

**Keywords:** *positive emotions, negative emotions, emotion regulation, couples, child emotional development, family relationships*

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## Introduction

The most intense positive and negative emotions are experienced in close relationships (e.g., couple and family relationships) (Fitness & Fletcher, 1990). You can feel that the world is yours because of your partner or you can feel very proud because of your child's achievements. Romantic partners express the most intense positive or negative emotions within their couples and children learn how to express and regulate their emotions within their family. Emotion regulation strategies affect relationship outcomes such as couple satisfaction, marital quality, or couple' intimacy. In addition, parents' emotion regulation abilities influence children' emotional development or the quality of parent-child relationship.

This theoretical paper is organized in five sections. The first section gives a brief overview of positive and negative functions of emotions. In the second section, we focused on the social role of emotions by emphasizing the role of positive emotions (e.g., joy, love, gratitude, contentment, interest, pride and hope) and negative emotions (e.g., hard, soft, fear-based and flat) in couple and family dynamics. In the third section, we presented the concept of emotion regulation and outlined the association of specific intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies with couple and family functioning. The fourth section describes the role of parents in the emotional development of their children. Finally, we discussed the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

## 1. Social functions of emotions

Over time, emotions and their functions have been studied from various perspectives. A classic view of the utility of emotions is that they have a role in survival and reproduction. For instance, the fear of predators or adversaries is adaptive because someone who experience such emotions are more likely to be alert and act to identify solutions to avoid or escape the threat (Öhman, 2008; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). While negative emotions can occur in threatening circumstances and constrain our awareness to promote a prompt reaction, positive emotions generally appear in secure contexts, facilitate extended attention, and raise exposure and receptivity to various occasions (Fredrickson, 1998). Fredrickson (1998; 2001; 2013) systematically addresses the beneficial effects of positive emotions.

Based on the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001), higher levels of positive emotions predict higher levels of creativity and determine long-term psychological, physical, and social resources. The standard

function of positive emotions is facilitating closeness and continuity of actions. Positive emotional experiences prompt individuals to engage in various adaptive activities (Fredrickson, 1998). One of the most evident functions of emotions is regulating social interactions. Sels et al. (2021) indicate three social functions of positive emotions: a) increasing closeness and intimacy in close relationships, b) improving the status of the person expressing positive emotions and creating a positive impression, and c) influencing others.

*Intimacy* function refers to the social advantages to relationship quality achieved by sharing positive emotions. Expressing positive emotions is usually perceived as an affiliative sign, communicating a willingness for cooperation (Shiota et al., 2004). The experience of positive emotions sustains intimacy by stimulating behaviour that facilitates reciprocity and connection. For example, in close connections, positive emotions have been related to responsiveness (Lin et al., 2019). The appropriate expression of positive emotions amplifies feelings of affiliation and the quality of social interactions (Kalokerinos et al., 2017). The feeling of sincerity in expressing positive emotions amplifies satisfaction in couple relationships (Leong et al., 2020). Gable et al. (2004) found that married individuals with spouses who provided active and constructive responses to positive events experienced greater intimacy, greater daily relationship satisfaction, and less daily conflict.

*Impression* function of positive emotions refers to how positive emotions can improve one's reputation in others' perceptions (Fischer & Manstead, 2016). Expressing gratitude often gives the impression of high emotional intelligence (Gulliford et al., 2019), and signs of pride are related to actions of perseverance and achievement that make individuals appear to have a higher status (Weidman et al., 2016). In addition, sharing positive events improves the mood of both partners. Both disclosing a positive event and receiving a positive disclosure are pleasurable (Hicks & Diamond, 2008). One partner's response to the other's positive event can heighten the impact, leading to even more positivity than the event initially evoked. Thus, impressions related to specific events can change as positive emotions are shared in the couple.

Because people use emotions to predict motivations and behaviour, another social function of positive emotions is *influence* (Sels et al., 2021). In addition to influencing the behaviour of others, positive emotions can be utilized to vary the emotional condition of others (Niven et al., 2019). In marital relationships, this process is often bidirectional, where partners develop a synchronous dynamic regulating each other's emotional experiences. Studies investigating mother-child interactions showed the

presence of an interaction that is characterized by reciprocity, receptivity, matching of affective states ("affect attunement") and a coordinated flow of emotion and behaviour (Harrist & Waugh, 2002).

### *2.1. Positive emotions in social contexts*

Fredrickson (2013) describes a series of positive emotions identified throughout the research as the most frequently experienced by people that substantially impact their lives. Some of these emotions are joy, love, joy, serenity/ contentment, gratitude, interest, pride, hope, amusement, inspiration, and awe (Mascolo & Fischer, 1995). Next, we discuss six more commonly implicated emotions in research on couple and parent-child relationships.

*Love* is a positive emotion that someone feels most often. It occurs when positive emotions are felt in a secure interpersonal relationship (Fredrickson, 2013). Love combines at least three functions that positive emotions can fulfil: sexual desire, attachment love and nurturing love (Shiota et al., 2014). Although there are neural and hormonal similarities between these types (Feldman et al., 2007; Panksepp, 1998), research has also noted cognitive and behavioural differences. For example, sexual desire is positively associated with risk-taking, while loving care fosters vigilance in risky situations (Li et al., 2012).

*Joy* represents a reward-oriented positive emotion. It usually occurs in familiar, secure situations that require moderate or low effort and, in some cases, as a result of achievement or progress toward a goal (Fredrickson, 1998). Joy drives the desire to play, overcome limits, and increases creativity. These reactions have social, physical, intellectual and artistic consequences (Fredrickson, 2013). Joy plays an essential role in the building and growth of intimate relationships. Expressions of joy positively affect partner preference, attachment, self-expansion (Shiota et al., 2004), and fidelity in romantic relationships (Aron et al., 2000). Joy, pride and contentment were identified as mediators in the association of economic stress with supportive dyadic coping in couple relationships. Specifically, for both partners, positive emotions (joy, pride, and contentment) were reduced when they shared economic stress, reducing dyadic supportive coping (Rusu et al., 2018; 2019).

*Gratitude* appears when someone acknowledges that someone else has given them something significant (McCullough et al., 2001). Research has identified a positive correlation between gratitude satisfaction in loyal relationships (Algoe et al., 2010). Other studies have discovered that gratitude to one's spouse positively correlates with one's perceived relationship strengths (Lambert et al., 2010). Research investigating parent-

child dyads found that parents' gratitude was significantly correlated with children's gratitude (Rothenberg et al., 2017).

*Contentment* occurs when people view their current circumstances as fully satisfying and correct. For example, people feel contentment, when they feel comfortable and at ease. Contentment creates opportunities to savor moments when priorities or values are fulfilled (Fredrickson, 2013). Contentment, along with other positive emotions, was found to mediate the effects of economic stress on supportive dyadic coping in romantic dyads (Rusu et al., 2018).

Although many positive emotions (Ekman, 1999) occur in occasions considered secure, *hope* is the exception. Hope occurs under challenging occasions where people fear the worst but hope for the best (Lazarus, 1991). Hope is considered an essential component of couples' therapy. In this context, therapists conceptualize several levels of hope: options, action, evidence, and connection (Ward & Wampler, 2010). The function of hope for parents is complex in the context of a child with a severe illness. A research study based on interviews with parents of seriously ill children, showed that parents identified themselves as hope promoters and recognized the emotional element of hope (Reder & Serwint, 2009).

*Pride* occurs when people achieve a fundamental purpose (Tracy & Robins, 2007) and triggers the drive to dream of even greater goals (Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Pride is connected to attachment and involves an emotion that affects self-evaluation against a certain standard (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Caregivers play an essential role in developing emotions in self-evaluation, showing support or objection to specific outcomes (Stipek, 1995).

### *2.2. Negative emotions in social contexts*

Research shows that negative emotions have an adaptive role. For example, a baby's crying signals a negative sentiment and prompts the caretaker to react by consoling and protecting (Bowlby, 1969). In the same sense, negative emotion is adaptive in close relationships between adults (Clark et al., 2001). For example, in marital relations, the wife may sense that the spouse has devoted too long outside the family. Consequently, she may feel sadness. Although the expression of this negative emotion could directly lead to a dispute in the relationship, it can also lead to an understanding of the woman's needs by the husband. Thus, the husband could spend more time with the family. In such situations, expressing negative emotions facilitates interactive coping (Barbee et al., 1996) and improves closeness and relational satisfaction for both partners (Sanford & Rowatt, 2004). However,

not all negative emotions can be beneficial for the relationship. Research examining couple relationships shows that expressing sadness as a negative response to a partner can be associated with practical effects on the relationship, but the results are reversed when expressing anger. Specifically, expressing sadness in a couple can induce empathy and compassion from the partner, while expressing anger can escalate to conflict (Finkel& Clark, 2002).

Sanford and Rowatt (2004) analysed the link between relationship functioning and three types of negative emotions: hard emotions (characterised by high arousal, e.g. anger that expresses power or control in close relationships) soft emotions (characterised by low arousal, e.g., sadness), and fear-based emotions (e.g. anxiety).

Also, research suggests that flat emotions can affect romantic relationships. For example, boredom has been shown to predict decreased future satisfaction with one's partner (Tsapelas et al., 2009), which may lead to separation. Ursu et al. (2020) examined negative emotions in romantic couples in a cross-cultural study. The researchers found that in both Romanian and Spanish couples the family of anger had the highest frequency; hard emotions such as anger and irritation were reported as having the highest intensity. On the other hand, Romanian participants more often experienced anger and disappointment, as well as families of anger and suffering, while Spanish participants more often experienced hurt, as individual emotion and families of hurt and shame. The level of anger reported by the Romanian participants was higher than the level reported by Spanish participants (Ursu et al., 2020).

## 3. Emotion regulation in romantic relationships

Emotion regulation consists of the used processes by people to decide which emotions to experience, when to feel them, and how to display them (Gross, 1998). Interpersonal emotion regulation includes processes people use to achieve a regulatory goal while participating in real social interactions (Zaki & Williams, 2013), whereas co-regulation is described as interpersonal emotion regulation strategy involving subjective, expressive and physiological components (Butler & Randall, 2013).

As time went on, many approaches for conceptualizing and classifying emotion regulation strategies were proposed. For instance, previous research has examined the affect regulation strategies and six types were proposed: antecedent-focused and response-focused, avoidance, behavioural, cognitive and engagement (Augustine & Hemenover, 2009). Later on, it was also indicated that emotion regulation might be

intrapersonal (referring to one's own emotions) and interpersonal (referring to other people' emotions) (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014).

### *3.1. Intrapersonal emotion regulation and relationship quality*

Emotion regulation and relationship quality are two of psychology's most studied concepts. Prior empirical research revealed that emotional process is essential in predicting relationship outcomes (Ben-Naim et al., 2013; Bloch et al., 2014). However, only few studies investigated the direct associations of emotion regulation strategies with relationship outcomes. For instance, the effects of aggressive externalization, cognitive reappraisal, cognitive emotion regulation strategies, down regulation of emotions, emotional expression, expressive suppression, and perspective taking were assessed in relation to relational outcomes in non-clinical samples. Specifically, existing studies found negative correlations between expressive suppression and relationship satisfaction in non-married and married couples (Cameron & Overall, 2018; Vater & Schroder-Abe, 2015; Velotti et al., 2016). In contrast, Mazzuca et al. (2018) suggest no effect of partners' expressive suppression on their own level of marital satisfaction or on their partners' level of marital satisfaction.

Research on cognitive reappraisal has shown that in general, this emotion regulation strategy positively correlates with relationship satisfaction among couples which are in different stages (newly married, young, middle-aged and adults) (Mazzuca et al., 2018). In addition, research shows that positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies influence marital satisfaction through positive dyadic coping among married people (Rusu et al., 2018). Moreover, results from conflict observational dyadic studies indicated that perspective taking was positively related to positive relationship outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction, while aggressive externalization strategy was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Vater & Schröder-Abé, 2015). Emotional expressiveness positively correlates with relationship satisfaction (Cameron & Overall, 2018), while behaviour down regulation of emotions in married women affected their own and their partner marital satisfaction (Bloch et al., 2014).

In addition, an experimental study showed that integrative emotion regulation (i.e., showing concern in one's emotions during conflicts) improved communication and determined a positive evaluation in terms of discussion compared to avoidance and suppression of emotions (two strategies which aim to minimizing emotional experience) (Shahar et al., 2019). Moreover, a quasi-experimental study found positive associations between extrinsic improving emotion regulation strategy and relationship

satisfaction among Romanian non-marital couples (Ursu & Turliuc, 2022). The same pattern was found for the link between intrinsic improving emotion regulation strategy and relationship satisfaction. In addition, the results of this study indicated that only extrinsic improving emotion regulation strategy mediated the influence of momentary romantic anger on their momentary relationship satisfaction.

Based on the aforementioned associations of emotions regulation with relationship outcomes, two lines of research emerge. First line of research supposes assessing the habitual use of specific emotion regulation strategies and investigating their effects on relationship satisfaction (Mazzuca et al., 2018; Ursu & Turliuc, 2022; Velotti, et al., 2016). The second line of research consists of assessing the effects of emotion regulation strategies on relationship satisfaction during conflict discussions (Bloch, et al., 2014; Finkel et al., 2013).

### *3.2. Interpersonal emotion regulation and relationship quality*

Interpersonal emotion regulation is another important concept when it comes to romantic relationships, as partners are regulating both, their emotions, but also their partners' emotions. Results from an ambulatory assessment study using positive humour as interpersonal emotion regulation strategy show that positive humour used in daily interactions to manage the partner's mood was more strongly linked to feelings of intimacy in women than in men(Horn et al., 2018). Additionally, another daily study assessed the effects of touch as an interpersonal emotion regulation strategy among romantic partners and it shown that the partners' intimacy increases when one partner touches the other partner (Debrot et al., 2013). The results of another recent study suggested that increasing positive emotions (an interpersonal emotion regulation strategy defined as people' intentions to turning to others to increase their positive affect) was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tepeli Temiz & Elsharnouby, 2022).

Recently, Kinkead et al. (2021) developed a scale to measure the intention of regulating emotions in the romantic dyad based on "Emotion Regulation of Others and Self" (EROS) scale (Niven et al., 2011). The scale consists of two factors: positive extrinsic emotion regulation and negative extrinsic emotion regulation. Positive couples extrinsic emotion regulation factor consists of items measuring the intention of one partner making the other one feel good or better, while negative couples extrinsic emotion regulation refers to the intention of one partner making the other one feel bad or worst. The same study indicated positive correlations between the

extrinsic improving factor (Positive couples' extrinsic emotion regulation factor) and relationship cohesion, relationship satisfaction, relationship consensus and affectional expression.

Another line of research consists of assessing the moderating role of emotion regulation between relational variables. A recent study evaluated whether interpersonal affect-worsening and interpersonal affect-improving strategies moderate the association between commitment, intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Jitaru & Turliuc, 2022). The results showed that man's commitment influenced his partner's couple satisfaction only when man was using interpersonal affect-worsening strategy and woman's usage of affect-improving strategies was positively related to her own and her partner's relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, the link between relational satisfaction and emotion regulation strategies could also be detected in clinical couples. Rick et al. (2017) found that women' intention to control emotions was positively associated with men's dyadic satisfaction in non-married and married couples, while emotion regulation strategies used by men and women were positively associated with their own level of dyadic satisfaction.

## 4. Emotion regulation in family relationships

Early on in childhood, parents contribute to their children' social and emotional development. The way parents express their own emotions, the way parents respond to their children's negative emotions, conversations between parents and their children about how to deal with their own and others' emotions influence the emotional development of children (Eisenberg et al., 1998). "The Tripartite Model of the Impact of the Family on Children's Emotion Regulation and Adjustment" (Morris et al., 2007) suggests that children's emotion regulation abilities are developed via three processes: *observation/modelling* (learning emotion regulation processes), *parenting practices* (parents teaching their children about emotion regulation strategies) *and the emotional climate of family* (attachment styles, parents' emotional expressiveness).

Related to parenting practices, it was reported that parents can intentionally teach their children adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as take a deep breathe or think of something nice for dealing with negative emotions. One study found that when the mother instructed her child to shift attention or to seek information during a frustrated task, the child expressed lower level of anger (Gilliom et al., 2002). Another mechanism explaining how parents influence the emotional development of their children is the amount of expressed verbally and non-verbally positive and

negative emotions in the family. More specifically, there is evidence that children of emotionally expressive parents have better abilities to express emotions (Halberstadt, 1986; Halberstadt et al., 1999).

As it can be seen, the role of mothers in developing children' emotion regulation abilities is well known. However, few studies examined the role played by fathers in the emotional development of children. In an intent to cover this gap, a recent study analysed how both parents' socialization practices affect the emotional development of their preschool children (Kaya-Bican et al., 2022). The findings indicated that when fathers reported low levels of support to their children, the maternal support was associated with children's high ability to regulate their emotions. In contrast, when fathers reported high support to their children, the impact of mothers' supportive emotion socialization practices on their children's ability to regulate their emotions was not significant.

## 5. Conclusions

This article reviews the literature on emotions and emotion regulation's impact on couple and parent-child relationships. The importance of the present article is given by the fact that, in addition to presenting the most important theoretical models regarding family functioning (Sels et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2007; Fredrickson, 1998), it analyses a series of research that has focused on both positive emotions (love, joy, gratitude, contentment, pride, hope) and negative emotions (hard, soft and fear-based emotions). The dual perspective of emotionality is helpful given that negative emotions are often considered unhealthy for relationships and in contrast to positive emotions. The present study highlights the complementarity of positive and negative emotions, noting that a healthy expression of negative emotions can strengthen and improve interactions between people in close relationships. Additionally, research suggests that intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies impact romantic relationship functioning, but also the development of children emotion regulation abilities.

In terms of limitations of the study, it worth to mention that it did not consider the cultural context that may bring differences in the impact of emotions, types of emotions and their regulation on family functioning. Future studies should focus on a differential analysis of emotion regulation at the family level in Western and Eastern countries. Moreover, in this discussion, a theoretical analysis of how emotions are processed at the level of families in Romania and their impact on the functionality of couple relationships and parent-child relationships could provide critical

information for specialists such as psychologists, therapists or social workers. Additionally, the results where the impact of emotion regulation strategies on couple and family dynamics are analysed have clinical implications. However, in order to better understand their effects, more intervention studies should be conducted for testing the effects of previous developed specific emotion regulation abilities such as cognitive reappraisal or extrinsic improving emotion regulation on couple and family functioning.

In conclusion, a significant amount of work has been done for a better understanding of how emotions and emotional processes affect partner and parent-child relationships. Intriguing new research on the relationship between emotions, this particular emotional process known as emotion regulation, and couple and family functioning is suggested by the findings of earlier research. This review provides a beginning point for this field of study in the pursuit of furthering our understanding of the emotional dynamics in romantic and familial relationships.

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