

# Perceived emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict between young adult romantic couples

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## Summary

This study argues that while young adults commit to romantic relationships to meet their needs for companionship, support and intimacy, they are often challenged by the inability to effectively regulate their emotions in response to interpersonal conflict. Emotion regulation refers to the modulation of feeling states or different emotions. This means that in the process of monitoring and evaluating their affective states, individuals take action to either maintain or to change the intensity of affect, to prolong or shorten the affective episode and to modulate the occurrence and psychosocial arousal associated with the emotion.

The aim of the study was to explore how couples in a romantic relationship perceive their emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict. The specific aims were to i) identify typical emotions experienced by young adult couples during interpersonal conflict; ii) identify typical emotion regulation strategies young adult couples apply during interpersonal conflict; iii) explore the perceived cause-effect relationship between these emotions and emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict; and to iv) develop a hypothetical model based on the relationship between these emotions and emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict.

Participants were 104 young adults between the ages of 19 and 26, divided into a small discussion group for generating themes, and a larger group for verifying the perceived cause-and-effect relationship between themes. Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) was applied to identify emotions experienced and emotion regulation strategies and to develop a conceptual model based on the perceived relationships between emotions and emotion regulation strategies. The model consisted of 9

themes in which 57.42 % (34) of the total number of relational pairs explained 80% of the variance.

Findings support the literature regarding the experience of negative emotions in response to interpersonal conflict. The model clearly shows that two different emotion regulation strategies are applied during interpersonal conflict, one similar to an antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategy and the other similar to a response-focused emotion regulation strategy. Both strategies, however, feed back into the same process again, without any clear solution or constructive outcomes.

Although the findings provide some exciting new avenues to explore in future research, some limitations have been identified that should be taken into account. These include the fact that individual interviews were not conducted in addition to the discussion group, while the use of a student population limits generalisation to other young adult groups.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie voer aan dat terwyl jong volwassenes betrokke raak in romantiese verhoudings om hulle behoefte aan kameraadskap, ondersteuning en intimiteit te bevredig, word hulle dikwels uitgedaag deur hulle onvermoë om hulle emosies in reaksie op interpersoonlik konflik effektief te reguleer. Emosieregulering verwys na die regulering van gevoelstoestand of verskillende emosies. Dit beteken dat die persoon gedurende die proses van monitering en evaluasie aksie neem om hetsy die intensiteit van affek te verander of te volhou, om die affektiewe episode te verleng of te verkort, en om die voorkoms van psigososiale opwekking wat met die emosie gepaard gaan te reguleer.

Die doel van die studie was om te verken hoe paartjies in 'n romantiese verhouding hulle emosieregulering ervaar gedurende interpersoonlike konflik. Die spesifieke doelstellings was om i) tipiese emosies wat deur jong volwasse paartjies ervaar word gedurende interpersoonlike konflik te identifiseer; ii) tipiese emosiereguleringstrategieë wat deur jong volwasse paartjies toegepas word gedurende interpersoonlike konflik te identifiseer; iii) die waargeneemde oorsaak-en-gevolg verband tussen die emosies en emosiereguleringstrategieë gedurende interpersoonlike konflik te verken; en om iv) 'n hipotetiese model gebaseer op die verhouding tussen hierdie emosies en emosiereguleringstrategieë gedurende interpersoonlike konflik te ontwikkel.

Deelnemers het 104 jong volwassenes tussen die ouderdomme van 19 en 26 ingesluit. Hulle is in klein besprekingsgroepe verdeel om temas te genereer, en hulle het in die groter groep saamgekom om die waargeneemde oorsaak-en-gevolg verhoudings tussen temas te verifieer. Interaktiewe Kwalitatiewe Analise (IKA) is

toegepas om die emosies en emosiereguleringsstrategieë te identifiseer en om 'n konseptuele model te ontwikkel gebaseer op die waargeneemde verbande tussen emosies en emosiereguleringsstrategieë. Die model bestaan uit 9 temas, waarvan 57.42 % (34) van die totale hoeveelheid verhoudingspare 80% van die afwyking verklaar het.

Bevindinge ondersteun die literatuur beskikbaar oor die ervaring van negatiewe emosies in reaksie op interpersoonlike konflik. Die model wys duidelik dat twee verskillende emosiereguleringsstrategieë toegepas word gedurende interpersoonlike konflik, een soortgelyk aan 'n voorafgaande-gefokusde emosiereguleringsstrategie en die ander soortgelyk aan 'n reaksie-gefokusde reguleringstrategie. Beide strategieë voer egter terug in dieselfde proses sonder enige duidelike oplossing of konstruktiewe uitkomst.

Alhoewel die bevindinge nuwe alternatiewe roetes van ondersoek verskaf vir toekomstige navorsing, is beperkinge geïdentifiseer wat in ag geneem moet word. Dit sluit in dat individuele onderhoude nie bykomend tot die besprekingsgroepe gehou is nie, en dat die gebruik van 'n studente-populasie die veralgemening na ander jong volwasse groepe belemmer.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Foreword	8
Consent for submission	9
Prescriptions of author	10
Author guidelines: South Africa Journal of Psychology	11
Literature review	15
Title of dissertations, authors and contact details	23
Abstract	24
Article	25
Introduction	25
Goal	30
Research method and design	30
Participants	31
Data Collection	32
Data Analysis	32
Rigor and Trustworthiness	34
Ethical Considerations	35
Results	36
Discussion	44
Conclusion	49
Reference	51

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I would like to thank my husband, Thinus Coetzee, for all his love and support. Without him bringing coffee during late nights, I probably wouldn't have finished my dissertation. Thank you for keeping me motivated and making me laugh.

To my parents, thank you for giving me the opportunity to complete my master's degree, for always believing in me and inspiring me to achieve my dreams.

Lastly, I would like to thank my heavenly Father for blessing me with the talents to be able to complete a Master's degree. Thank you for your grace, love and support.

## **Foreword**

### Article format

This dissertation is part of the requirements for completion of the Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology and is in accordance with the specific university regulations of the Northwest University in article format.

### Journal

This dissertation is according to the recommendations and guidelines of the South African Journal of Psychology

**Consent for submission of section for examination**

I, the supervisor of this study, confirm that the article titled: *Perceived emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict between young adult romantic couples*, written by M.S. (Arzaan) Badenhorst reflects her research on the subject. I give my consent that she may submit the article for examination and confirm that it complies with the requirements of the MSc in Clinical Psychology. It may also be submitted to the South African Journal of Psychology for publication.

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Prof Karel Botha

## **Prescriptions of author**

This article will follow guidelines of the American Psychological Association 6th edition (APA 6th), as the South African Journal of Psychology requires these specific guidelines for publication reasons.

Note: To help the examiners in their evaluation, the following exceptions will apply:

- The introductory section of the article will have headings, although it is not required according to the guidelines of The South African Journal of Psychology.
- Page numbers will follow after the title page.
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- with a minimum of 3cm for left and right hand margins and
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## **Literature Review**

In this review the complex phenomenon of emotion regulation will be discussed as an additional introduction to the article. Firstly an integrative definition of emotion regulation (starting with the concepts of emotion and self-regulation) will be described, followed by emotion regulation processes and strategies. The concept of interpersonal emotion regulation will also be explained. Lastly a conclusion and preview of the article will be provided.

## **Emotion**

Emotions are characterized by positive and negative responses to the external stimuli and/or internal mental representations that (i) comprise of changes across multiple response systems (experiential, behavioural, and physiological) (ii) are distinct from moods in that they often have identifiable objects or triggers, (iii) can either be unlearned responses to stimuli with intrinsic affective properties or learned responses to stimuli with acquired emotional value, (iv) and can involve multiple types of appraisal processes that assess the significance of stimuli to current goals that (v) depend upon different neural systems (Gross & Thompson, 2006; Ochsner & Gross, 2005; Scherer, 2005).

Emotion thus arises when an individual gives meaning to a specific goal or situation. The origin of the goal or situation is less important than the created meaning in triggering the experience of emotion (Gross & Thompson, 2006). Emotions facilitate decision making, has significant influences on learning and memory, and provides the motivation to take action towards environmental stimuli. This indicates that emotion plays an important role concerning survival and adaption of the individual in their environment (Davidson, Jackson & Kalin, 2000).

According to the component process model emotion is an episode or state of interrelated, synchronized changes to external or internal stimuli that's relevant to the individual. The episode corresponds to five different subsystems that coordinate change over time. The subsystems are (1) Cognitive (appraisal) entails the evaluation of objects and events. (2) Neurophysiological (bodily systems) is responsible for regulating the entire system of felt emotion. (3) Motivational (action tendencies) plans the preparation and direction of action or behaviour necessary. (4) Motor expression (facial and vocal expression) is the way an individual communicates the reaction and behavioural intentions to another individual and (5) Subjective feeling (emotional experience) is the monitoring of internal states and environmental interaction (Davidson, Jackson & Kalin, 2000).

In conclusion emotions are the present conception that makes us feel something and makes us do something (Gross & Thompson, 2006; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011).

### **Self-regulation**

According to Baumeister and Vohs (2007), self-regulation refers to the capacity of organisms (human beings) to override and alter their responses, for example, the process by which people attempt to constrain unwanted urges in order to gain control of the initial response. Regulation means changes occur to meet the standards of an individual's goals or ideals. These changes include behavioural cognitive and emotional states (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007).

In other words self-regulation is the self's capacity for altering behaviours, which increases flexibility and adaptability, to enable individuals to adapt to various social and situational demands (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). It's a multi-component, multi-level, recurrent process, with affects and actions, in responses in coordination with

one's goals (Boekaerts & Cascallar, 2006; Human-Vogel & Van Petegem, 2008).

Self-regulation and emotion regulation are often so intertwined that it's difficult to say where one ends and the other begins (Vohs & Baumeister, 2011).

## **Emotion Regulation**

According to Vohs and Baumeister (2011) emotion regulation targets the offset of emotional responding and is thus distinct from the processes that involve the onset of emotional responding (individuals subsequent emotion regulation process), or emotional sensitivity (individuals primary emotional response). The processes model of emotion regulation, which will be explained, offers a comprehensive analysis of the response strategies an individual may attempt to use when regulating emotions (p34). Therefore, emotion regulation (or affect regulation, as preferred by some authors) refers to the modulation of feeling states or different emotions. This means that in the process of monitoring and evaluating their affective states, individuals take action to either maintain or to change the intensity of affect, or to prolong or shorten the affective episode (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). In addition to intensity and duration, emotion regulation also includes the modulation of the occurrence, and psychosocial arousal associated with the emotion (Aldao, 2012; Butler & Randall, 2012; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2011; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Emotion regulation may be deliberate, automatic and temporal in order to create the appropriate responses in a changing environment in order to enable individuals to reach their goals (Aldao, 2013; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Gross, 1998; Marroquin, 2011; Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007; Ochsner & Gross, 2005; Ochsner & Gross, 2008; Robertson, et al., 2011). It is deliberate in the sense that it is driven by explicit goals, and involves conscious effort and requires attentional resources with some level of insight and awareness. When emotion regulation is automatic it is implicit, goal-driven and

occurs without a conscious decision and without attention, insight and awareness (Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007; Webb, Miles & Sheeran, 2012).

The function of emotion regulation is not to eliminate maladaptive or unhealthy emotions and replace them with adaptive ones but rather to influence the dynamics of each emotion in order to produce adaptive appropriate responses to the environment, for instance in interpersonal context (Robertson et al., 2011). According to Koole's (2009), the function of emotional regulation is to satisfy one's hedonic needs (promoting pleasure and avoiding pain); it is goal-orientated, in the manner that one regulates or alters negative emotions to promote performance; and it is person-orientated to adjust information processing to suite the demands of the task at hand.

According to Gross (1998; 2002) and Gross and Thompson (2006) emotion regulation involves two processes; antecedent- focused and response-focused emotion regulation. These processes are executed by two strategies namely cognitive reappraisal, which consists of changing the perception of a situation; and expressive suppression which consists of changing the intensity and expression of an emotion (Gross & Thompson, 2006). These two processes can be categorized and explained through five steps. First antecedent-focused emotion regulation begins the process by selecting the situation that will contribute to an individual reaching their goal and evaluating the emotion cues related to it, while situation modification refers to a potentially emotion-eliciting situation. The situation determines the specific process that will take place - in antecedent-focused emotional regulation the affective state is regulated even before it has been enacted. Attentional deployment appears when we need to find a way to cope with the situation, either by directing attention towards or away from the situation. This is

done through cognitive reappraisal, which entails that situation modification takes place by comparing the different aspects of the situation and by attaching meaning to these aspects (attentional deployment). Lastly, response modulation takes place when response-focused emotion regulation is used to suppress emotions (Gross & Thompson, 2006; Webb, Miles & Sheeran, 2012). During response-focused emotion regulation, affective cues trigger a set of response predispositions (emotional and behavioural reactions learned from previous experience) that involve experiential, behaviour and physiological systems. The individual then responds to the predispositions by modulating them in various ways, for example suppressing the emotion (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003). Emotion regulation can therefore also be seen as input (antecedent – focused emotion regulation and cognitive reappraisal) and output (response -focused regulation and expressive suppression) processes of emotions (Aldao, 2013).

Because antecedent-focused emotion regulation is a proactive strategy, it is healthier (more adaptive) than response-focused emotional regulation (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). Response-focused emotional regulation takes more effort from an individual because the emotion is already present. An individual only changes the behaviour, but the intensity of the emotion is usually not reduced. In a situation where negative emotions are suppressed they may stay unresolved leading to discrepancy between outer expression and inner experience. When someone is incongruent they tend to feel negative about themselves and withdraw from interaction because they are unable to connect to another to form emotional close relationships (Gross, 1998; Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; Gross & John, 2004; John & Gross, 2004). Adaptive emotion regulation (deliberate) helps one to function successfully in the environment by containing the emotion in order for the

individual to continue to engage in goal-directed behaviours. Individuals need to establish emotional awareness and acceptance first. Maladaptive emotion regulation takes place when one is unable to contain the emotion and can't engage in goal-directed behaviours. Individuals either, 1) under regulate by reacting to the emotion in an inappropriate manner, feeling angry and then screams (behaviour and emotion is inseparable) or, 2) over regulate by blocking the emotion that's being experienced to unfold through avoidance or expressive suppression.

Thompson (1994) indicates that emotion regulation consists of both an intrinsic (intrapersonal) and extrinsic (interpersonal) process that is responsible for monitoring the emotional reaction. Emotion regulation therefore consists of both regulating one's own emotions and of regulating another person's emotions. Research demonstrates that emotion in itself serves social functions; we respond to the reactions of our partner through a process of interpersonal emotion regulation (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Anestis, Bagge, Tull, & Joiner, 2011; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Bridges, Denham, & Ganiban, 2004; Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011; Laurent & Powers, 2007; Marroquin, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). There is no widely accepted definition available for interpersonal regulation since little research has been done on the subject. Butler and Randall (2012, p.1) suggest that it is called co-regulation which they define as "a bidirectional linkage of oscillating emotional channels between partners, which contributes to emotional stability of both partners".

Relational regulation theory (RRT) (Lahey & Orehek, 2011) is a specific approach to interpersonal emotion regulation. According to RRT individuals regulate their affect through everyday significant conversations and shared activities. According to Lahey & Orehek (2011) RRT have eight key principles that applies to emotion regulation, namely 1) recipients regulate their affect, action and thoughts primarily through

social interaction, 2) social interaction primarily regulates affect, action and thought relationally, 3) relational regulation occurs primarily in ordinary (day by day) yet affectively consequential social interaction, 4) relational regulation occurs primarily through conversation and shared activities that elaborate on recipients cognitive representation of relationship, 5) perceived support is based primarily on relational regulation of affect through ordinary interactions but sometimes also on enacted support, 6) relational regulation is dynamic in that people shift conversations, interaction partners, and activities in an attempt to optimally regulate affect, 7) social support interventions will be more effective if they harness relational regulation, and 8) the wider the diversity of potential relationships that are available to recipients, the greater the likelihood of effective regulation (more freedom of choice) (p 486-491). Gross (2013) suggests that the processes of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (explained earlier) tend to indirectly regulate a partner's emotions. Another approach that combines regulation of the self and others' emotions is emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). According to Murphy and Janeke (2009) emotional intelligence is an essential skill to support people in adjusting and adapting well to their environment in a way that allows them to understand, cope and use their emotions and the emotions of others effectively to solve problems creatively. Goleman (1995) emphasizes that managing relationships (understanding the self and others) and knowing when and how to express emotions is important for problem solving. Emotional intelligence has four allied functions that promote the processing of emotional information, namely perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thinking, making sense of emotions and regulating one's own emotions and the emotions of others (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008) . According to Smith, Heaven and Ciarrochi (2008) emotional intelligence is compiled by adaptability,

assertiveness, the perception, expression, management and regulation of emotions, self-esteem, low impulsiveness, relationship skills, self-motivation, stress management, social competence, trait empathy, trait happiness, and trait optimism. It thus integrates the affective facets of personality into one trait (p 1315). These traits may lead to effective problem solving in a creative manner, in order to achieve partners' interdependent goals.

### **Conclusion and preview of the article**

Emotions are a set of experiential, physiological and behavioural response tendencies that unfold over time. It occurs as an indication of either progress toward or frustration of one's goals or ideals. It plays an important social function and emotion regulation is necessary for the individual to be able to adapt and adjust to the environment (in any context) for optimal functioning. This creates a positive context to solve problems creatively in an effective manner. It can be said that emotion regulation is a multi-component, multi-level process with continuous re-evaluation and adjustment of emotional experiences and expression.

In the article that follows emotion regulation will be explored in a group of young adults in romantic relationship, during interpersonal conflict. It will focus on the emotions experienced, the emotion regulation strategies used in an attempt to promote conflict resolution, and the perceived relation between them by developing a hypothetical model.

**Title of dissertation, authors and contact details**

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## **Perceived emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict between young adult romantic couples**

### **Abstract**

The study explored how young adults in romantic relationships perceive their emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict. Participants included 104 young adults between the ages of 19 and 26. Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) was applied to identify emotions experienced, emotion regulation strategies and the perceived relationships between them during interpersonal conflict. A conceptual model, consisted of 9 themes in which 57.42 % (34) of the total number of relational pairs explained 80% of the variance, was developed. Findings show that participants experience negative emotions in response to interpersonal conflict with their romantic partners and that they apply two different, yet initially overlapping emotion regulations strategies. Both strategies feed back into the same process again, without any clear solution or constructive outcomes. Implications and limitations are discussed and recommendations for further research are made.

*Keywords:* interpersonal emotion regulation, emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, interpersonal conflict, romantic relationships, young adults

## Introduction

According to Levinson (1986) young adulthood is a transitional period that terminates the existing life and creates the possibility of a new life phase. It is necessary to reflect on the existing life, and to start to explore new possibilities for change in the self and the world before being able to move towards commitment with the self and others. Young adults commit to romantic relationship to meet their needs for companionship, support and intimacy (Goldstein, Chesir-Teran, & McFaul, 2008; Shulman, Connolly, & Mclsaac, 2011). Erikson 1950 (as cited in Weiten, 2007) described young adulthood (20 – 34 years) as the stage of intimacy versus isolation in personality development. When the developmental challenges of young adulthood are not met, it may lead to the inability to form intimate relationships and a subsequent feeling of isolation (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). These developmental challenges include conforming to one's own identity, not being cautious of experiencing rejection and the painful emotions involved, and being fearful of break-ups. Romantic relationships often provide serious challenges that may lead to interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflict refers to an active process in which dependent individuals experience discrepancies and divergent thoughts. This may withhold them from achieving their goals and in return negative emotional reactions like jealousy, anger, anxiety or frustration could be generated (Bark & Hartwick, 2004; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Landahl, Terverskoy, & Zurilla, 2005).

Interpersonal differences are also influenced by each individual's perception and include contextual, cognitive, behavioral and not just affective factors (Bark & Hartwick, 2011; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003; Kashdan, Volkmann, Breen, & Han, 2007). This indicates

that interpersonal conflict has a significant impact on individuals' functioning because of the holistic influential effect it has.

Conflict can have destructive outcomes when not resolved constructively. Individuals may for example see themselves as separate from others or define themselves based on the opinions of others. They could then seek destructive or violent means of reaching their goals and be left with feelings of hurt and resentment (Ceren, 2008; Kriesberg, 2007; Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson, 2008). This leads to separation and alienation that may cause break-ups, and even divorce (Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006; Wong, 2009), while Yarnell and Neff (2013) indicate that effectively resolving conflict will in contrast improve a couple's well-being. Emotions or affective states influence behaviour, experience and cognition directly related to decision making (Gross & Thompson, 2006), especially in terms of interpersonal contexts (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). As negative affect may have adaptive beneficial effects when constructively managed (Forgas, 2013), for example improved attention, reduced stereotyping, achievement striving and attentive interpersonal strategies, it is therefore critically important that emotions are regulated to maintain wellbeing and to prevent destructive interpersonal outcomes (Anestis et al., 2011).

Emotion regulation (or affect regulation, as preferred by some authors) refers to the modulation of feeling states or different emotions. This means that in the process of monitoring and evaluating their affective states, individuals take action to either maintain or to change the intensity of affect, or to prolong or shorten the affective episode (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). In addition to intensity and duration, emotion regulation also includes the modulation of the occurrence, and psychosocial arousal associated with the emotion (Aldao, 2012; Butler & Randall, 2012; Robertson et al.,

2011; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Emotion regulation is deliberate and temporal to create the appropriate responses in a changing environment and to enable individuals to reach their goals (Aldao, 2013; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Gross, 1998; Marroquin, 2011; Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007; Ochsner & Gross, 2005; Ochsner & Gross, 2008; Robertson, et al., 2011).

According to Gross (1998; 2002) and Gross and Thompson (2006) emotion regulation involves two processes; antecedent- focused and response-focused emotional regulation. These processes are executed by means of two strategies, namely cognitive reappraisal, which consists of changing the perception of a situation; and expressive suppression, which consists of changing the intensity and expression of an emotion (Gross & Thompson, 2006). Emotion regulation begins by the selection of a situation that will contribute to an individual reaching their goal and evaluating the emotional cues related to it. The situation determines the specific process that will take place - in antecedent-focused emotional regulation, the affective state is regulated even before it has been enacted. This is done through cognitive reappraisal, which entails that situation modification takes place by comparing the different aspects of the situation and by attaching meaning to these aspects (attentional deployment).

In contrast, in response-focused emotion regulation, affective cues trigger a set of response predispositions (emotional and behavioural reactions learned from previous experience) that involve experiential, behaviour and physiological systems. The individual then responds to the predispositions by modulating them in various ways, for example suppressing the emotion (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003). Emotion regulation can also be seen as input (antecedent-focused emotion

regulation and cognitive reappraisal) and output (response-focused regulation and expressive suppression) processes of emotions (Aldao, 2013).

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emotional stability of both partners". Relational regulation theory (RRT) (Lahey & Orehek, 2011) is a specific approach to interpersonal emotion regulation. According to RRT individuals regulate their affect through every day, yet affectively significant conversations and shared activities. Gross (2003) suggests that the processes of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (explained earlier) tend to indirectly regulate a partner's emotions.

Another approach that combines regulation of the self and others' emotions is emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). According to Murphy and Janeke (2009) emotional intelligence is an essential skill to support people in adjusting and adapting well to their environment in a way that allows them to understand, cope and use their emotions and the emotions of others effectively to solve problems creatively.

Goleman (1995) emphasises that managing relationships (understanding yourself and others) and knowing when and how to express emotions is important for problem solving. Emotional intelligence has four allied functions that promote the processing of emotional information: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thinking, making sense of emotions and regulating one's own emotions and the emotions of others. This leads to effective problem solving in a creative manner.

(Cherniss, 2005; Lopes, Salovey, Beers, & Côté, 2005; Murphy & Janeke, 2009).

Problem solving refers to a person's capacity to resolve problems to maintain effective functioning. Not all disputes are problematic, but those problems that threaten a person's health and emotional well-being should be resolved to enable the individual to reach his or her desired state (Rizkalla, et al., 2008).

Although it is clear from the literature that emotion regulation is an essential mechanism in managing interpersonal conflict, a review of the literature indicates that little research has been done specifically in the context of romantic relationships.

This leaves a gap in existing knowledge of effective emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships and how it presents in unmarried romantic relationships. Subsequently, the following exploratory research question was asked: How do couples in romantic relationships perceive their emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict?

### **Goal**

The aim of the study is to explore how couples in a romantic relationship perceive their emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict.

The specific aims are:

- i) To identify typical emotions experienced by young adult couples during interpersonal conflict.
- ii) To identify typical emotion regulation strategies young adult couples apply during interpersonal conflict.
- iii) To explore the perceived cause-effect relationship between these emotions and emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict.
- iv) To develop a hypothetical model based on the relationship between these emotions and emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict.

### **Research method and -design**

The study can be described as descriptive and explorative Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA: Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) was subsequently chosen as methodology. IQA makes use of both deduction and induction through a process based on elements of concept mapping, grounded theory, action research and systems theory (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). IQA's theoretical point of departure is that humans

construct their reality within social settings - as a result, it aims to systematically facilitate a group process through which a construction about a specific reality (in this case emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict) is allowed to emerge. In doing so, IQA provides participants an opportunity to create a perceived cause-and-effect mental model of that reality (Human-Vogel, 2006; Human-Vogel & Van Petegem, 2008). The IQA data collection is objective in the manner that it allows participants to share their lived realities and map their own stories (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). This contributes to the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the study.

## **Participants**

A sample of 104 participants took part in the study, consisting of a smaller discussion group of 8 participants who identified the themes and a larger group of 96 participants who validated the model of relationships that emerged from the first group. Purposeful sampling (Palys & Fraser, 2008) was used to select group 1, consisting of young adults between the ages of 18 and 26 (3 Males and 5 Females). The size of the discussion group is based on Massey's (2011) recommendation of between 6 and 12 participants. The participants were selected from the student population of the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University (NWU). This population was recruited by approaching two lecturers from departments other than psychology to ask permission to invite students to take part in the study. Snowball sampling was also used to invite participants for the study, as the first attempt was not successful to recruit enough students. Participants and their partners were divided into different small groups for discussions.

Group 2 consisted of a convenience sample of 96 (42 Males and 64 Females) young adult students between the ages of 19 and 26 from two different faculties from the

NWU, excluding psychology students. All participants met the following criteria:

They were i) within a stable heterosexual romantic relationship; ii) seriously committed to the relationship; iii) unmarried but may be engaged; iv) not living with parents; and v) able to freely express themselves in either Afrikaans or English.

### **Data collection**

The first part of data collection was a 3-hour discussion group with participants of group 1. A discussion group is a carefully strategic and deliberate dialogue with a group, typically consisting of 6 to 12 members, in a non-threatening, facilitating environment (Massey, 2011). The interaction was started by presenting a general discussion on romantic relationships. Thereafter participants were asked to define the importance and meaning of their relationships. The group was then divided into three smaller groups for the purpose of the discussion. They were asked: i) what emotions do you experience during interpersonal conflict with your romantic partner? and ii) what do you typically do when you experience these emotions? The groups were allowed time to discuss and write down their answers for analysis purposes.

### **Data analysis**

Through a facilitating process the smaller groups used inductive coding by writing down their response onto note cards - one response per card - and organising the responses according to their meanings (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.47).

Subsequently, the group was then guided through facilitation to name each group of cards, as well as to do revision (axial coding) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.47). Each group of cards represents a theme or 'affinity' as it is referred to in IQA.

The final step was to identify the relations between themes through theoretical coding, in which both groups participated. Theoretical coding is done by means of a questionnaire that the researcher compiles to measure the perceived cause-and-effect relationship between the clearly defined themes (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.48). An example from the questionnaire is for instance:

In your experience, which of the following is most characteristic of your own experience during interpersonal conflict with your romantic partner (chose only one possibility)?

- a. withdrawal causes avoidance,
- b. avoidance causes withdrawal, or
- c. withdrawal and avoidance have no influence on each other,

Participants from sample group 1 individually completed the questionnaire directly after the discussion group, whereas group 2 completed the questionnaire via e-mail.

Next the number of votes for each possible relationship theme was counted and chronicled as a frequency in descending order, known as the cumulative frequency (CF). Thereafter the cumulative percent of relations (CPR) was calculated, based on the number of total possible relationships. This was followed by calculating the cumulative percent of frequencies (CPF) based on the number of votes cast, and lastly, the Power analysis (P) as an index of the degree of optimisation of the system.

The principle of parsimony (to use the fewest number of affinity pairs to represent the greatest amount of variation to attain comprehensiveness and richness from the data) was used to decide the number of affinities to include in the interrelationship

diagram (IRD) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). These relations were then used to construct the interrelationship diagram (IRD) that indicates the strength and direction of relations that will be used in the final mental map. The strength of each relation is expressed by delta ( $\Delta$ ), which determines the position of the themes in the mental map. The themes with a positive delta ( $\Delta$ ) are relative drivers or causes and those with negative deltas are relative effects or outcomes (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 173 – 184). The final step was to develop the System Influence Diagram (SID), which is the visual representation or mind map of participants' perceived cause-effect relationship between their emotions and emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict. The SID is developed on the rule of rationalisation through the process of redundancy (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). This means that redundant links can be removed as there are alternative paths through an intermediary theme to create a more simplistic and easily understandable model (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004).

### **Rigour and Trustworthiness**

Because the IQA process follows a rigorous stepwise procedure, it should naturally increase the trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004). According to Northcutt and McCoy (2004, p.38), the IQA process is rigorous because it i) is public and non-idiosyncratic; ii) is replicable within reasonable bounds; and iii) provides exact rules for different independent researchers to produce mental maps that are topologically identical regardless of their biases or the meaning of the elements. In addition to this, Tracey's (2010) guidelines for quality, based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, but also a further extension of it, was followed to further enhance the trustworthiness. The following criteria were applied: i) Rigour - the researcher was diligent by spending appropriate time, effort care and thoroughness

in doing the research, and in doing so, strove to ensure face validity; ii) Sincerity - the researcher continuously reflected on her own personal values, biases and inclinations regarding the topic with guidance from her study leader. The researcher was honest and transparent regarding the methodology, challenges and limitations of the study; iii) Credibility - the researcher was trained in focus group interviewing before data generation took place. This was facilitated by the project leader. To ensure internal validity, participants were given enough time to reflect on the questions and explain the meaning of their perceptions and the experience of emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict. In this way the researcher ensured that the research questions are answered. To ensure external validity (compare Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.17), the IQA protocol for constructing the mental maps were applied independently by three different researchers. IQA is inherently a form of triangulation, specifically as it systematically and appropriately integrates qualitative and quantitative methods; iv) Resonance - the researcher attempted to write the research report in such a way that the topic is not lost in cold scientific facts, but that it contributes to empathy, identification and reverberation of the research by readers who did not have a direct experience with the topic. In this study transferability was not essential, because the aim of the study is only to explore and develop a hypothetical model that could be further investigated by other researchers; v) Significant contribution - the aim of the study was to generate new hypotheses about emotion regulation during interpersonal conflict in romantic partners. It therefore has heuristic significance (compare Tracey, 2010, p.846), in other words, it might develop curiosity in the reader and inspire new discoveries.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study forms part of a research project entitled “The nature and dynamics of self-regulation as psychological strength in diverse South African health and clinical contexts” with ethical approval from the NWU. This study was approved as a sub-study (NWU-00103-11-A1) by the Human Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences of the NWU. The researcher strictly adhered to the following project principles: Contacted lecturers and participants did receive an informed consent form that entailed a complete and clear description of confidentiality, permission, the procedure and dissemination of the results. Participants could have withdrawn at any given moment without having to motivate why and without any consequences for them. In conclusion, the research study followed Tracey’s (2010, p.846-848) criteria for i) procedural ethics (do not harm, avoid deception, informed consent); ii) relational ethics (recognise and value mutual respect, dignity and connectedness between research team and participants); and iii) exiting ethics (data is kept safe and confidential).

## **Results**

Nine themes were identified during the focus group session, namely 1) Withdrawal, 2) Avoidance, 3) Frustration, 4) Anger, 5) Pride / Self-centeredness, 6) Doubt, 7) Anxiety / Tension, 8) Sadness and 9) Impulsivity (see table 1).

**Table 1: Theme description**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
1. Withdrawal:	Deliberately withdrawing (taking a break) from the conflict in an effort to get objective distance before reacting / responding to the person in conflict with.
2. Avoidance:	Deliberately avoiding or even denying the conflict in order not to think about it, because for various reasons (inappropriate setting, need to study, feeling to tired etc.) they are not able to resolve the conflict now.
3. Frustration:	When not knowing how to solve the conflict, feelings of helplessness and despondence are experienced; this causes frustration or discouragement.
4. Anger:	A feeling of anger directed at the conflict, not the person.
5. Pride / Self-centeredness:	When a person is acting in a hard-headed manner and doesn't want to admit that he/she may be wrong.
6. Doubt:	When a person is feeling / or acting in a suspicious or disbelieving manner about the other person's

	commitment to the relationship.
7. Anxiety / Tension:	The unresolved conflict causes feelings of restlessness.
8. Sadness:	The experience of hurt and disappointment.
9. Impulsivity:	Saying or doing unnecessary things in response to the conflict, to the person you are in conflict with.

The power column (table 2) reached a maximum at 31 relationships, which accounted for 57, 42% of variance within the system. In this case the Pareto Principle (a small number of the relationships explain the greatest amount of variation, typically 20/80) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) was not applicable.

Consequently, it was preferable to use 49 affinity pairs (80% variance explained) to create the model. In this manner a well representative sample of responses were selected, since the majority of votes for the affinity pairs were distributed more evenly across the sample. The principle used to decide on 80% of variance is *parsimony*: to use the fewest number of affinity pairs that represents the greatest amount of variation to attain comprehensiveness and richness from the data (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). Conflicting roles can be seen in table 2 where affinity pairs, which are influenced in both directions, could cause feedback loops. When feedback loops occur it means that the argument between the two affinities may not be resolved because of a failure to identify another affinity that could intervene somehow (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). To prevent feedback loops the affinity pair with

the highest frequency will be used to build the model, while the smallest frequency pair was omitted from the model (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). Several theme pairs were excluded because it conflicted with other pairs, which had higher frequencies (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Theme pairs frequency, analysis and the Power in relation to one another.**

Theme Pairs	Frequency	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative %	Cumulative % frequency	Power
3→4	91	91	1.388888889	2.847309136	1.458420248
6→3	73	164	2.777777778	5.131414268	2.35363649
5→9	73	237	4.166666667	7.415519399	3.248852732
6→9	72	309	5.555555556	9.668335419	4.112779863
1→7	68	377	6.944444445	11.79599499	4.851550549
3→7	65	442	8.333333334	13.82978723	5.4964539
2→4	64	506	9.722222223	15.83229036	6.11006814
8→2	64	570	11.11111111	17.83479349	6.72368238
7→6	64	634	12.5	19.83729662	7.33729662
7→4	62	696	13.88888889	21.77722153	7.888332637
2→7	60	756	15.27777778	23.65456821	8.376790431
4→6	60	816	16.66666667	25.53191489	8.865248226
4→9	60	876	18.05555556	27.40926158	9.35370602
6→8	60	936	19.44444445	29.28660826	9.842163814
1→5	59	995	20.83333333	31.13266583	10.2993325
8→1	59	1054	22.22222222	32.9787234	10.75650118
8→7	59	1113	23.61111111	34.82478098	11.21366986

3→2	56	1169	25	36.57697121	11.57697121
1→2	55	1224	26.38888889	38.29787234	11.90898345
1→6	55	1279	27.77777778	40.01877347	12.24099569
2→6	54	1333	29.16666667	41.70838548	12.54171881
9→3	54	1387	30.55555556	43.3979975	12.84244194
5→8	53	1440	31.94444445	45.0563204	13.11187595
9→7	53	1493	33.33333334	46.7146433	13.38130997
9→8	53	1546	34.72222222	48.37296621	13.65074398
8→4	51	1597	36.11111111	49.96871089	13.85759977
8→3	50	1647	37.5	51.53316646	14.03316646
5→2	49	1696	38.88888889	53.06633292	14.17744402
2→3*	47	1743	40.27777778	54.53692115	14.25914337
3→1	46	1789	41.66666667	55.97622028	14.30955361
9→2	46	1835	43.05555556	57.4155194 <sup>a</sup>	14.35996384
1→3*	44	1879	44.44444445	58.7922403	14.34779585
4→1	44	1923	45.83333334	60.1689612	14.33562786
4→8*	44	1967	47.22222223	61.5456821	14.32345988
5→7	44	2011	48.61111111	62.922403	14.31129189
1→8*	43	2054	50	64.26783479	14.26783479
3→8*	43	2097	51.38888889	65.61326658	14.22437769
6→1*	42	2139	52.77777778	66.92740926	14.14963148
5→6	42	2181	54.16666667	68.24155194	14.07488527
1→4*	41	2222	55.55555556	69.52440551	13.96884995
7→9*	41	2263	56.94444445	70.80725907	13.86281462
9→1	40	2303	58.33333334	72.05882353	13.72549019

6→2*	40	2343	59.72222223	73.31038798	13.58816576
3→5	40	2383	61.11111112	74.56195244	13.45084132
4→5	40	2423	62.5	75.8135169	13.31351689
5→3*	39	2462	63.88888889	77.03379224	13.14490335
2→1*	38	2500	65.27777778	78.22277847	12.94500069
5→4*	38	2538	66.66666667	79.41176471	12.74509803
7→8*	38	2576	68.05555556	80.60075094	12.54519538
-----					
4→2	36	2612	69.44444445	81.72715895	12.2827145
2→9	36	2648	70.83333334	82.85356696	12.02023362
3→9	36	2684	72.22222223	83.97997497	11.75775274
7→1	35	2719	73.61111112	85.07509387	11.46398275
6→7	35	2754	75.00000001	86.17021277	11.17021276
8→6	35	2789	76.38888889	87.26533166	10.87644277
7→2	34	2823	77.77777778	88.32916145	10.55138367
9→4	33	2856	79.16666667	89.36170213	10.19503545
2→8	32	2888	80.55555556	90.36295369	9.80739813
6→4	31	2919	81.94444445	91.33291615	9.388471694
5→1	29	2948	83.33333334	92.24030038	8.906967036
1→9	29	2977	84.72222223	93.14768461	8.425462377
7→5	29	3006	86.11111112	94.05506884	7.943957718
8→5	29	3035	87.50000001	94.96245307	7.462453059
8→9	25	3060	88.88888889	95.74468085	6.855791955
4→7	23	3083	90.27777778	96.46433041	6.186552628
2→5	22	3105	91.66666667	97.15269086	5.48602419

7→3	21	3126	93.05555556	97.8097622	4.75420664
3→6	17	3143	94.44444445	98.3416771	3.897232644
6→5	17	3160	95.83333334	98.87359199	3.040258649
9→6	16	3176	97.22222223	99.37421777	2.151995542
9→5	12	3188	98.61111112	99.74968711	1.13857599
4→3	8	3196	100	100	0

\* Affinity pairs omitted from model due to conflicting roles.

----- Indication of the endpoint of the affinity pairs that will be included in the development of the SID.

<sup>a</sup> Indication of the Pareto Principle.

The Interrelationship diagram (IRD) (see table 3) shows that there were no primary drivers, therefore the highest drivers was the theme pair with the highest frequency, which was placed first in the SID.

**Table 3: The Interrelationship Diagram**

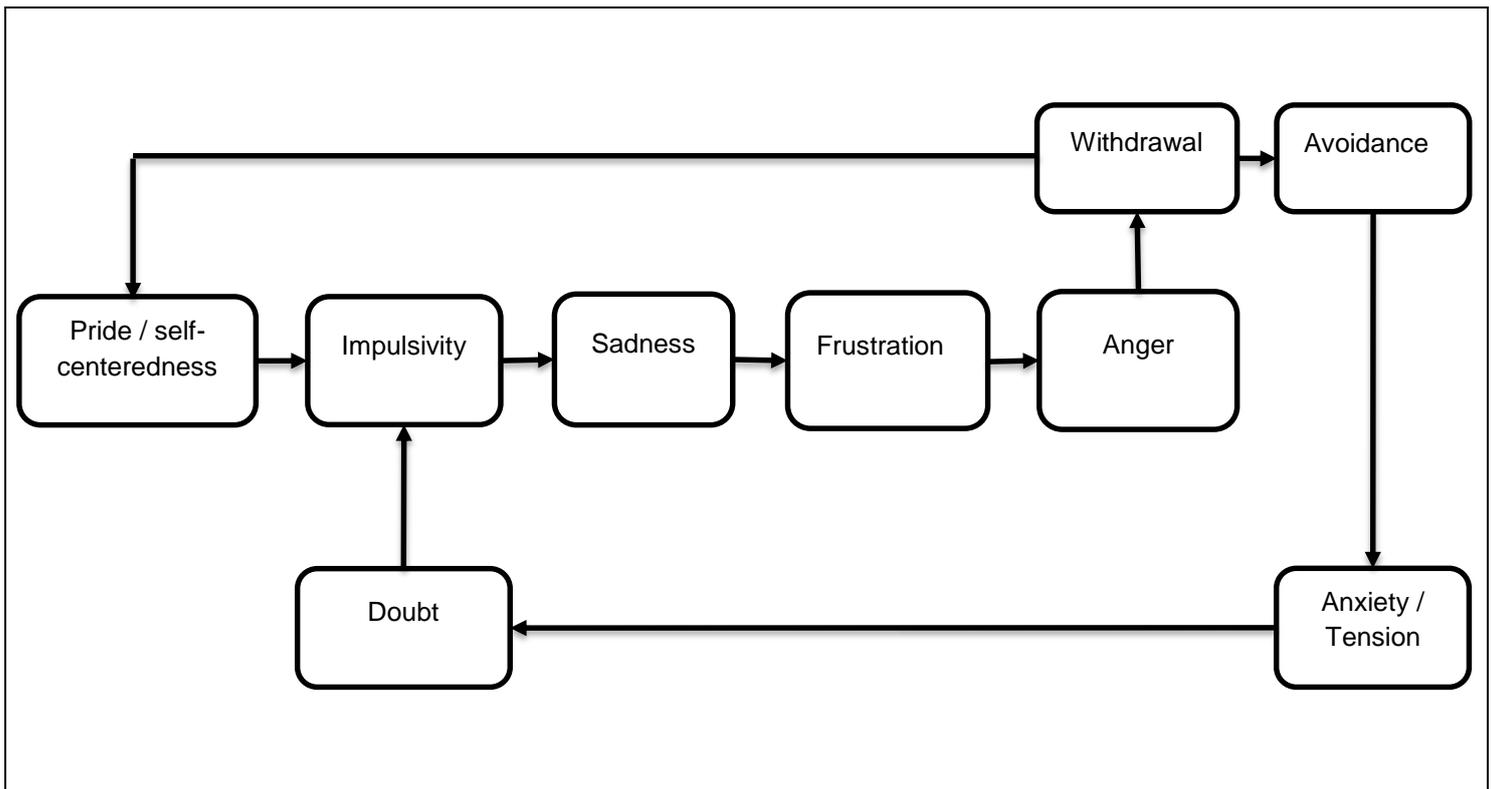
Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	OUT	IN	Δ
1	█	↑	←	←	↑	↑	↑	←	←	4	4	0
2	←	█	←	↑	←	↑	↑	←	←	3	5	-2
3	↑	↑	█	↑	↑	←	↑	←	←	5	3	2
4	↑	←	←	█	↑	↑	←	←	↑	4	4	0
5	←	↑	←	←	█	↑	↑	↑	↑	5	3	2
6	←	←	↑	←	←	█	←	↑	↑	3	5	-2
7	←	←	←	↑	←	↑	█	←	←	2	6	-4
8	↑	↑	↑	↑	←	←	↑	█	←	5	3	2
9	↑	↑	↑	←	←	←	↑	↑	█	5	3	2

Table 4 shows the status of each theme and their relative positions within the SID. It is clear that there are no primary drivers and no primary outcomes. There are 4 secondary drivers, two pivots and three secondary outcomes.

**Table 4: Interrelationship Delta and Model Placement**

			Out	In	Delta ( $\Delta$ )
Secondary Driver	Pride/self-centeredness	Theme 5	5	3	2
Secondary Driver	Impulsivity	Theme 9	5	3	2
Secondary Driver	Sadness	Theme 8	5	3	2
Secondary Driver	Frustration	Theme 3	5	3	2
Circulator/Pivot	Anger	Theme 4	4	4	0
Circulator/Pivot	Withdrawal	Theme 1	4	4	0
Secondary Outcome	Avoidance	Theme 2	3	5	-2
Secondary Outcome	Doubt	Theme 6	3	5	-2
Secondary Outcome	Anxiety/Tension	Theme 7	2	6	-4

The final SID is shown in Figure 1. The SID indicates that participants perceived two different routes in regulating their emotions during interpersonal conflict. Firstly, it seems that on experiencing a conflict situation in a romantic relationship they first experience feelings of pride or self-centeredness. Hereafter, impulsivity, sadness, frustration, anger and withdrawal are experienced. Withdrawal then may either be fed back into the starting point of pride/self-centeredness to close the first route, or may lead to avoidance, feelings of anxiety, doubt, and back to impulsivity, to complete the second route. It is clear from the model that both routes form part of an ongoing process with no definite outcome.



**Figure 1: The final model System Influence Diagram (SID)**

## Discussion

All of these themes indicate that antecedent-focused (cognitive reappraisal) and response-focused (expressive suppression) emotion regulation processes are used during interpersonal conflict. This is evident from the definitions of each theme, the first four themes are context-orientated (antecedent-focused) and the following themes are reaction / action-orientated (response-focused)

Interestingly, the first response to interpersonal conflict is pride / self-centeredness. Pride plays a role in achieving goal directness, especially when being motivated to reach a desired goal when external, immediate rewards are not available (Koole & Rothermund, 2011; Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Pride has different facets, namely authentic- and hubristic pride. Authentic pride is when someone is working towards a goal to experience feelings of accomplishment or confidence (Tracey & Robins,

2004; Tracey & Robins 2007; Tracey, Cheng, Robins, & Kali, 2009). As pride is a self-conscious emotional reaction that requires self-awareness and self-evaluation (Tracey & Robins, 2004; Tracey & Robins 2007; Tracey et al, 2009), individuals who have developed a well-established emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) that allows understanding, coping and the effective use of own and others' emotions to solve problems creatively (Murphy & Janeke, 2009), will probably develop authentic pride.

Hubristic pride, in contrast, is when someone responds from their inner being towards external threats (in this instance conflict). It's an explicit emotion regulation process, which leads to a feeling of failure and then negative emotions like anger and sadness, which also follow later in the model (Williams & DeSteno, 2008; Williams & DeStenos, 2009). Hubristic pride appears to be relatively defensive and neurotic in nature (McGregor, Nail, & Marigold, 2005). Since individuals respond to reactions (behaviours) of their partners instead of the partners' emotions, intrinsic processes lead to extrinsic (interpersonal) processes of emotion regulation (Thompson, 1994). The position of pride in the model is thus an indication that interpersonal conflict leads to intrapersonal (intrinsic) emotion regulation, which the individuals then regulate in an explicit manner towards the conflict situation. This is an indication that participants in this study primarily experience hubristic pride during interpersonal conflict.

It is therefore not surprising that the pride / self-centeredness that participants experience, in turns lead to impulsivity. Impulsivity is a reaction to a specific impulse that is goal-directed for short term immediate gratification that could have a negative impact on long term goals for the romantic relationship (Hofmann, Fries & Strack, 2009).

As impulsivity is not experienced as effective in resolving the conflict, the reality of the situation then triggers the first of three negative emotions, namely sadness. This affect can be characterized by feelings of disadvantage, loss, despair, helplessness and sorrow (Jellesma & Vengerhoets, 2012). It's a general stress response to challenging situations (Gross & Thompson, 2006). Sadness in turn is then followed by feelings of frustration, probably because participants then start to experience the feeling that the relationship is not developing in the intended direction. From a self-regulation perspective, frustration is an indication of a discrepancy between intended goals and current progress toward those goals. Another possibility is that frustration is experienced because participants don't know how to address or respond to the conflict in an appropriate manner. Anger is a normal reaction to unresolved frustration (Aldao, 2013; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Gross, 1998; Marroquin, 2011; Mauss et al., 2007; Ochsner & Gross, 2005; Ochsner & Gross, 2008; Robertson, et al., 2011). In the context of this study, participants indicated that their anger is directed at the conflict, and not necessarily the other person.

According to Forgas (2013, p 227-229) negative emotions can often have adaptive beneficial effects: a) Improved memory, by the fact that negative mood are more accommodative and externally focused, and in return attention and encoding are improved, b) Improved judgmental accuracy by means of excluding bias towards a person, but improving your perspective. In return gullibility is reduced and skepticism increased c) Motivational benefits by means of better cognitive functioning. Individuals are more goal-orientated, which leads to achievement and d) Interpersonal benefits in that when a person experience negative moods they will approach someone more cautiously, consider interpretations and results with more

politeness and attentive interpersonal strategies, resulting in increased fairness and more effective persuasion (Botha, 2014).

These adaptive benefits are reflected in participants' effort to withdraw ("deliberately withdrawing or taking a break from the conflict in an effort to get objective distance before reacting / responding to the person in conflict with"). The individuals thus tend to withdraw from the conflict to gain perspective. However, this again leads to pride or self-centeredness. The reason for this may be that either the withdrawal is not effective and that the uncertainty it creates then leads to hubristic pride again, or that the couple tries to reconcile, but that the conflict is still not being managed effectively, and therefore the continuation of the whole process starts again.

Withdrawal can, however, also lead to avoidance, the start of the second route. Avoidance leads to anxiety, and then doubt. This may imply that avoidance does not bring about effective change in the conflict (or in self-regulation terms, does not reduce the perceived discrepancy between intention and current behaviour). This is because avoidance is a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy causing tension and doubt (Aldao, 2013; Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Katzir & Eyal, 2013). Individuals then react to the experienced emotions of tension and doubt once again in an impulsive manner, which could be destructive for the romantic relationship (Shulman, et al, 2006; Wong, 2009).

The model thus contains two definite pathways of emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict. The initial route can be defined as a potentially healthier (adaptive) route, as it starts with reaction towards the other person, but later gain distance and focus on the situation using cognitive reappraisal techniques before confronting the interpersonal conflict again. This seems to be similar to an

antecedent focused emotion regulation cognitive reappraisal strategy (Gross & Thompson, 2006), as the participants attempt to regulate the negative emotions in a way that prevents further emotional harm by withdrawing from the conflict.

The second route can be defined as a potentially unhealthy (maladaptive) route, as it's a continuous reaction to the other person using expressive suppression techniques in an attempt to solve the interpersonal conflict. With the alternative route it is clear that interpersonal conflict will not be resolved as denial of conflict does not create an appropriate response from the participants. Indeed, it rather makes them anxious, which according to Gross & Thompson, (2006) negatively influences behaviour, experience and cognition related to decision making directly, particularly in terms of interpersonal context (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). According to Smith et al., (2008, p.1322) conflict avoiding couples are at some risk to experience dissatisfaction within relations over time, because they are not able to gain a sense of "working through" conflict situations. This route therefore seems like a response-focused emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2006) using expressive suppression as an output process. As a result, it creates anxiety and doubt, which then also results in continuation of the whole process.

Kelly et al, (1983, p. 38) defines close connections as "one of strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence [between two people] that last over a considerable period of time". This means that two individuals in a romantic relationship are interdependent on each other, and that they influence each other's behaviour, thoughts and feelings (Bark & Hartwick, 2011; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013; Jensen-Campbell, et al, 2003; Kashdan, et al, 2007). In return, interpersonal conflict will not be resolved unless both individuals have reached their desired goal through emotional regulation. This could be indicative of unresolved interpersonal conflict,

meaning that individuals' goals were not met (Bark & Hartwick, 2004; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Landahl, et al, 2005). Therefore, it is possible that the continuation of the process can be an attempt to meet one's goals.

It is therefore critically important that emotions are regulated in an interdependent manner to prevent destructive interpersonal outcomes (Anestis, et al, 2011). From the model it is clear that emotion regulation is a continuous process, reacting on intrinsic (initially) and extrinsic thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Thus it's difficult to focus on emotion as an individual aspect in interpersonal conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the study was to explore how young adults in romantic relationships perceive their emotion regulation strategies during interpersonal conflict. Findings support the literature regarding the experience of negative emotions in response to interpersonal conflict. From the model that was developed it is clear that two different emotion regulation strategies are applied during interpersonal conflict. The first seems to be similar to an antecedent focused emotion regulation cognitive reappraisal strategy in which the participants in this study attempt to prevent further emotional harm by withdrawing from the conflict. The second strategy seems like a response-focused emotion regulation strategy in which expressive suppression is used, but which creates anxiety and doubt. Both strategies feed back into the same process again, without any clear solution or constructive outcomes.

The inability of young adults to effectively regulate their emotional experiences in response to interpersonal conflict should thus be explored more in-depth in future studies. A specific focus could be the extent to which emotional regulation is related to the observable behaviour of one's partner, and in addition, the inability to engage

in true interpersonal or co-regulation efforts. This will need to be explored in further research.

Although the study has provided further research opportunities, some limitations have to be considered. Individual interviews were not conducted after the focus group as Northcutt and McCoy (2004) recommends, due to practical difficulties. Furthermore, a student population was used, meaning that results cannot be generalised to other young adult populations.

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