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Mihaela JITARU, Maria Nicoleta TURLIUC

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Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Strategies and Anticipated Emotions in Couples: A Mixed Method Approach

Mihaela JITARU¹, Maria Nicoleta TURLIUC²

Abstract

Although interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) has gained more attention in recent years, few studies focus on IER in romantic relationships. In this study, using a qualitative-quantitative approach, we assessed the most commonly-used IER strategies employed by couples in both positive and negative interactions, and the anticipated self and partner's emotions arising from their utilization. One hundred and ninety-nine couples participated in this research. The participants had to read a vignette that had a positive connotation and imagine they were the main character and write answers to four questions. Then, they had to repeat the process, using the negative connotation vignette. The questions were focused on the assessment of the self-anticipated IER strategies as well as the self and partner's anticipated emotional reactions associated with the self-anticipated IER strategies. The thematic analysis showed that most of the participants described IER strategies that fit either into the 'cognitive engagement' category or in the 'put own feelings first' category. The most frequently anticipated self and partner's emotions were 'calm', 'joy' or 'sadness'. IER strategies have an effect not only on the target but also on the regulator. This aspect can contribute to a better understanding of couple relationships.

Keywords: interpersonal emotion regulation; strategies; emotions; couple relationship; thematic analysis.

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Department of Psychology, Iasi, ROMANIA.
E-mail address: mia.jitaru@gmail.com

² Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Department of Psychology, Iasi, ROMANIA.
E-mail address: turliuc@uaic.ro (*Corresponding author*)

Introduction

In recent years emotion regulation (ER) has been used more and more in the research of couples and families (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2012; McNulty & Hellmuth, 2008). Another concept, interpersonal emotion regulation (IER), has also gained more attention, yet it still is a newer concept that requires more studies in order to be better understood. Although ER and IER may seem similar to a certain extent, the research of IER can lead to a more solid comprehension of couple and family relationships. In this paper we aim to contribute to the clarification of this conceptual distinction using a qualitative inquiry. We did that by (1) exploring the IER strategies used by couples in positive and negative situations, and by (2) identifying the emotions brought up by these strategies.

Literature review

Interpersonal emotion regulation in romantic relationships

IER is an interpersonal process through which a person actively tries to change another person's emotional state (Niven, 2017; Niven, Totterdell, & Holman., 2009). Being a social-based process (Butler, 2015; Niven, 2017), IER plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, such as friendship (Niven, Holman & Totterdel, 2012a), work relationships (Madrid, Totterdell, Niven, & Vasquez, 2018; Troth, Lawrence, Jordan, & Ashkanasy, 2018) or the relationships among teammates (Campo et. al, 2016). Although all these relations are relevant, the romantic relationship seems to receive more IER related actions than friendship or work-related relations (Niven et al., 2012b). Other types of emotional regulation or even emotion-related concepts have been linked to couple functioning. For example, intrapersonal ER is a process through which we influence the occurrence of our emotions, the moment they appear and how we experience and express them (Gross, 1998). Although it is an individual process, it has an influence on how relationships work (Ben-Naim, Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013; Gross & John, 2003; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lopes, Salovey, Cote, Beers, & Petty, 2005; Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003; Vater & Schroder-Abe, 2015). Using some ER strategies (e.g. reappraisal) has a positive effect on interpersonal relations, while using others (e.g. suppression) has a negative effect on them (Ben-Naim et al., 2013; Lopes et al., 2005; Gross & John, 2003; Richards et al., 2003). Therefore, the strategies of intrapersonal ER can be classified as either adaptive or maladaptive (Aldao, Jazaieri, Goldin, & Gross, 2014). In addition, emotional intelligence, in which ER is included, is not only a predictor for couple satisfaction (Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014), but can also be a factor in the prevention of violence in romantic couples (Blázquez Alonso, Moreno Manso,

& García-Baamonde Sánchez, 2009). Since the intrapersonal ER strategies have an impact on the couples' relations (Laurent & Powers, 2007) we can assume that the use of specific strategies of IER can have an even higher impact on romantic relationships (Horn & Maercker, 2016; Niven, Macdonald, & Holman, 2012b).

The strategies of IER have been classified by taking into account the effect they have on the target (Niven et al., 2009) or the way the target responds to the regulator's efforts (Zaki, & Williams, 2011). In the first case, these strategies can either improve or worsen the affect (Niven et al., 2009). In the second case, the IER strategies are classified into two categories, response-dependent and response-independent. Therefore, the targets of the regulation either respond to the regulators' effort, or they do not respond and even do not perceive the regulator's attempts (Zaki, & Williams, 2011). In this study we aim to observe whether the strategies described by Niven and her colleagues (2009) are relevant for romantic dyads in both positive and negative situations.

Using a qualitative-quantitative approach, we aim to assess the most commonly used IER strategies in romantic relationships. Also, we want to investigate the expected self-emotions and partner emotions that appear after using specific regulation strategies.

Interpersonal emotion regulation and emotions

An emotion is the evaluation of an event by taking into consideration the aspects that are relevant to us, such as our goals, aspirations or concerns (Oatley, 2004). An emotion occurs when an event (internal or external) succeeds to elicit a change in the organism, either on the cognitive level (such as a change in ideas) or on the physiological level (Lewis, 2008). Internal events are based on an intense level of cognitive activity or some rapid changes in the person's physiology. External events can be social, dependent on other persons or non-social, dependent on the surrounding environment (Lewis, 2008). As a result, are able to identify our own emotions. In addition, we can recognize, to some extent, the emotions expressed by others (Hutchison & Gerstein, 2016)

Previous studies explored the mechanisms which allow the individuals to anticipate their own emotions. Affective forecasting is a prediction that people make about their future emotional reactions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). People have trouble anticipating the intensity and the duration of an emotional reaction, yet they can accurately predict the valence of the anticipated emotion (e.g. happiness, sadness) (Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998).

We can also understand the way in which individuals use and predict their emotional responses through the theory of planned behaviour. It proposes a model that explains which factors influence a person's intention to act in a certain way and, as a consequence, the actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control play a significant

role in a person's intention to behave in a certain manner (Ajzen, 1991). Other models of the theory of planned behaviour add the anticipated emotions as an influencing factor (Perugini, & Bagozzi, 2001). Thus, the way an individual anticipates how a certain behaviour will make them feel will influence the intention to perform the said behaviour.

Furthermore, we can argue that interpersonal related compartments have emotional consequences for the person doing the actions. For example, people's happiness can be increased by their kindness (e.g. spending money on others) or by expressing gratitude (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Also, the regulator can simply mimic the emotional response that the target exhibits (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993), in this case, as a result of the IER strategies. When the regulator is not in the position to obtain feedback from the target, the regulator's mood can still suffer changes due to their anticipation of the target's emotions (van Kleef, 2009). Based on previous results (Niven, et al., 2012a; Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Headley, 2012c), we can assume that people experience changes in their mood when they try to influence other's emotions. This is a plausible hypothesis given that different interpersonal dynamics, as communication (Candel & Turliuc, 2019) or similar beliefs (Dohotariu, 2012) can influence relationships' outcomes.

The aim of this study is to assess the most commonly used IER strategies and the self as well as the partner's emotions elicited by the use of certain strategies. Firstly, we want to observe the most commonly used IER strategies by couples in positive and negative situations. For this purpose, the participants read two vignettes and after each one they were asked to describe the action they would take in a similar situation. Secondly, we want to assess the anticipated emotions for the self and for the partner following the use of IER strategies. Taking into consideration their answer to the first question, they had to say what emotion they would feel after doing the action and what emotion they believe their partner would experience.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were either students taking undergraduate psychology courses at a major north-eastern Romanian University or have been recruited by the students taking the same courses. The students received bonus course credit for either completing the questionnaire with their partners or for recruiting a couple to complete the same questionnaire. The participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were assured about the anonymity of the answers. Three hundred and ninety-eight participants (one hundred and ninety-nine women and one hundred and ninety-nine men) completed the questionnaire

and met the inclusion criteria (being over 18 and being in a relationship for at least 6 months). On average, the participants were 26 years old ($M_{men}=27.54$, $SD_{men}=9.35$; $M_{women}=25.26$, $SD_{women}=9.05$) and had been in a relationship for 66 months ($M=66.34$, $SD=90.04$). Ninety-six of the participants (forty eight couples) were married and the rest of three hundred and two participants (one hundred and fifty-one couples) were dating.

Procedure and Measure

Firstly, the participants were asked to read a vignette that had a positive connotation, then they wrote the answers to four questions (“What would you do in this situation?”; “How would you feel afterwards?”; “How would your partner feel, taking into consideration your answer from the first question?”; “What else could you do in this situation?”). After answering the first set of questions, the participants were asked to read another vignette, only that this time it had a negative connotation. Then, they had the task of answering the same set of questions a second time. The two vignettes were adapted based on the ones used by Lagotte (2014). The positive connotation vignette content is: “*Your significant other has plans to go out with his or her friends. They invite you to come along, but you let them know that you would rather stay home. Before the meeting, your partner tells you that he/she would rather stay home because she/he wants to spend more time with you.*”. The negative connotation vignette content is “*There is an upcoming event that you plan on attending with your significant other. You are very interested in going to this event, but in the morning before it takes place your significant other tells you that she/he is not in the mood and would rather stay at home.*”

Data Analysis

Following the thematic analysis strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the obtained data for the IER strategies were coded by two different coders that had used the categories created by Niven et al. (2009). These categories include either affect-improving strategies (positive problem-focused engagement; positive target-focused engagement; cognitive engagement; humour; distracting and valuing) or affect-worsening strategies (negative affective engagement; negative behavioural engagement; diminishing comparisons; withdrawal; criticizing; disrespect and put own feelings first). The intercoder reliability was calculated by using the joint probability of agreement method (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2004). We calculated the intercoder reliability coefficients for the answers given for both positive and negative situations and for the main strategies as well as the alternative ones. The coefficients varied from .84 to .95. All of them being over 0.80 (Lombard et al., 2004), we considered them acceptable for the current research. The same process was repeated for the data targeting the anticipated

self and partner emotions. The coders had to choose from a pre-established list of emotions (Cowen & Keltner, 2017) the ones that better fit the description in order to have a clearer processing of the emotions described by the participants in the study. In this case, we calculated interrater agreement coefficients for the self emotions and the partner's emotions for both positive and negative situations. The interrater coefficients varied from .90 to .95. We considered them acceptable for the research as they were all over 0.8. After the coding was finished, we analysed the frequencies for the IER strategies and the anticipated self and partner's emotions. Also, we calculated the chi-square coefficients for the gender differences in main and alternative IER strategies, and self and partner's emotions.

Results

To test our hypothesis, we used the thematic analysis strategy to assess the frequencies of the main and the alternative IER strategies in both positive and negative vignettes.

Table 1. *The frequencies of the main and alternative IER strategies in positive and negative situations.*

IER strategies	Positive situation main strategies	Positive situation alternative strategies	Negative situation main strategies	Negative situation alternative strategies
Nothing	15	50	6	47
Positive problem focused engagement (stay home)	22	2	0	0
Positive problem focused engagement	32	142	59	40
Positive target focused engagement	2	1	0	0
Cognitive engagement	166	106	23	29
Distracting	39	3	1	4
Valuing	71	39	1	5
Put own feelings first	2	5	136	89
Negative affective engagement	0	3	18	3

Withdrawal	0	5	94	106
Disrespect	0	1	0	2
Behavioural engagement	0	0	2	0
Criticizing	0	0	1	0
Other	49	41	57	73

Firstly, in the case of the positive connotation vignette, the answers for the first question revealed that most of the participants described IER strategies that better fit the ‘cognitive engagement’ (166 participants) category and the ‘valuing category’ (71 participants) (see *Table 1*). The ‘positive problem focused engagement’ category included strategies coming from 54 of the participants. Although all of them fit this category well, we decided to divide the category into two different dimensions based on the intention of the participants. From the 54 participants, 32 of them wrote strategies that describe the intent of changing their decision and convincing their partners to go out with their friends, while 22 of them gave answers that point out a different intention, that of staying at home with the partner and accepting her/his decision. Another 39 of the participants described strategies that entered the ‘distracting’ category, 2 of the participants wrote strategies that were from the ‘positive target focused engagement’, 2 of the participants described actions that fit the ‘put own feelings first’ category, 15 of the participants said they would do absolutely nothing in a similar situation and 49 of the participants described actions that fit none of the pre-established categories.

When asked what different answer they would give in a similar situation, we observed some changes in the IER strategies. Most of the participants gave answers that better fit the ‘positive problem focused engagement’ (142 of the participants) category and the ‘cognitive engagement’ (106 of the participants). Another 39 of the participants gave answers that fit the ‘valuing’ category, while 50 of the participants affirmed that they would not do anything differently, other than the first action. Fewer answers are found in other categories: ‘withdrawal’ (5), ‘put own feelings first’ (5), ‘distracting’ (3), ‘negative affective engagement’ (3), ‘positive problem focused engagement – stay at home’ (2), ‘positive target focused engagement’ (1), ‘disrespect’ (1).

Secondly, in the case of the negative connotation vignette, after answering the first question, the strategies described by the participants better fit the ‘put own feelings first’ category (136 participants), the ‘withdrawal’ category (94 participants) and the ‘positive problem focused engagement’ category (59 participants). Another 23 of the participants’ answers fit the ‘cognitive engagement’ category and another 18 of the participants described strategies that better fit the ‘negative affective engagement’ category. Fewer of the participants gave answers

that were appropriate for the following categories: 'behavioural engagement' (2 participants), 'distracting' (1 participant), 'valuing' (1 participant), and 'criticizing' (1 participant). Only 6 of the participants reported that they would do nothing in a similar situation, while 57 of the participants gave answers that did not fit the description of an IER strategy.

When asked what alternative action would they prefer, most of the participants described strategies that fit the 'withdrawal' category (106 participants) and the 'put own feelings first' category (89 participants). Another 47 of the participants reported that they would do nothing in a similar situation other than the first action, 40 of the participants would use a strategy from the 'positive problem focused engagement' category, 29 of the participants' answers fit the 'cognitive engagement' category, fewer of the participants described strategies that better fit the 'valuing' category (5), the 'distracting' category (4), the 'negative affective engagement' category (3) and the 'disrespect' category (2). The remaining participants answered describing actions that are not IER strategies.

When taking into consideration the gender, we observed that in the case of the positive connotation vignette, the answers for the first question revealed that most women preferred IER strategies from the 'cognitive engagement' category (83), the 'valuing' category (32) or the 'distracting' category (28). Most men preferred IER strategies that are from the 'cognitive engagement' category (83), the 'valuing' category (39) or the 'positive problem-focused engagement' category (16). As alternatives to the first answers, most women preferred strategies from the 'positive problem-focused engagement' category (72), the 'cognitive engagement' category (62) or the 'valuing' category (20). Most men gave answers that fit in the 'positive problem-focused engagement' category (70), in the 'cognitive engagement' category or they said they would do nothing else than the first action (32). For the same situation, the emotions anticipated for self in the case of women were calm (43), joy (38), contentment (37) or guilt (27). Also, they would expect their partners to feel contentment (42), calm (40) or joy (31). Most men reported anticipated self-emotions which are calm (53), joy (41), guilt (29) or contentment (25). Also, they expected their partners to experience calm (51), joy (43) or contentment (25).

For the negative connotation vignette, the results show that most women preferred strategies that are from either the 'put own feelings first' category (80) or from the 'withdrawal' category (49). Most men, in the same situation preferred IER strategies that are from the 'put own feelings first' category (56), the 'withdrawal' category (45) or the 'positive problem-focused engagement' (36). As for alternative IER strategies, on the one hand, most women described ones that are better fit in the 'withdrawal' category (46), the 'put own feelings first' category (43), the 'positive problem-focused engagement' category (24) or said that they would do nothing in this situation (24). On the other hand, most men had similar answers: 'withdrawal' (60), 'put own feelings first' (46) or doing nothing different from the first answer (23). After using certain IER strategies most women anticipated that

they would feel sadness (90) or disappointment (36) and expected their partners to feel sadness (53), calm (49) or guilt (25). Most men anticipated that they would feel sadness (75), calm (39) or disappointment (26) and expected their partners to experience calm (58), sadness (41) or guilt (24).

In order to determine whether there are any significant differences between the men and women's preferred IER strategies, we conducted a Chi-Square test for Association. The results showed that for the positive vignette there were significant differences between men and women for the main IER strategies ($\chi^2 (8) = 18.56, p = .017$). The greater differences can be observed in the 'distracting', 'valuing', 'nothing' and 'positive problem focused engagement (stay at home)' categories. More women than men preferred the strategies from the 'distracting' and 'positive problem focused engagement (stay at home)'. However, more men than women preferred IER strategies from the 'valuing' category or declared they would do nothing in a situation similar to the one described in the vignette. For the alternative IER strategies, there were no significant differences between the men and women ($\chi^2 (11) = 12.07, p = .358$).

The results showed significant differences between the men and women for the main IER strategies for the negative vignette ($\chi^2 (10) = 37.92, p < .001$). More women than men preferred IER strategies from the 'negative affective engagement' and 'put own feelings first' categories, while men seemed to prefer strategies from the 'positive problem focused engagement' and 'cognitive engagement' categories. Also, some men, but no women declared they would do absolutely nothing in a similar situation. In this case, for the alternative IER strategies, there were no significant differences between the men and women ($\chi^2 (9) = 5.86, p = .754$).

Table 2. *The frequencies of self and partner emotions in relation to IER strategies in positive and negative situations*

Emotions	Positive situation self emotions	Positive situation partner emotions	Negative situation self emotions	Negative situation partner emotions
admiration	1	0	0	0
amusement	0	0	0	1
anxiety	4	9	15	27
boredom	1	0	0	1
calm	96	91	60	107
confusion	6	8	4	1
contentment	62	67	10	23

disappointment	3	6	62	17
eagerness	0	0	1	0
excitement	3	0	0	0
fear	0	0	0	1
freedom	0	4	3	1
anger	0	6	31	25
guilt	56	3	14	49
happiness	29	33	0	5
indifference	0	2	3	7
interest	0	3	0	0
joy	79	74	14	12
love	1	0	0	0
Nostalgia	0	0	1	0
Pride	23	12	1	3
Relief	2	0	0	1
Romance	1	1	0	0
Sadness	3	34	165	94
satisfaction	10	2	1	0
Surprise	1	3	0	1
Worry	1	0	0	0
no emotion	16	40	13	22

When analysing the emotions (see *Table 2*), we observed that in the case of the positive connotation vignette, most of the anticipated self-emotions better fit the following emotion categories: calm (96), joy (79), contentment (62), guilt (56), happiness (29), pride (23) and satisfaction (10). Fewer of the participants reported anticipated self emotions that fit other emotional categories: confusion (6), anxiety (4), disappointment (3), excitement (3), sadness (3), relief (2), admiration (1), worry (1), loving (1), boredom (1), romance (1), surprise (1). In 16 of the cases, the participants did not give an emotion or a description of one.

After the examination of the anticipated partner emotions, we observed that most of the participants considered that their partners would feel: calmness (91), joy (74), contentment (67), sadness (34), and happiness (33). Some of the other

participants considered that their partners would show emotions from the following categories: anxiety (9), confusion (8), anger (6), disappointment (6), freedom (4), interest (3), surprise (3), guilt (3), satisfaction (2), indifference (2) and romance (1). Another 40 of the participants gave answers that were not emotions or descriptions of ones.

In the case of the negative connotation vignette, most of the participants reported anticipated self-emotions that fit the following categories: sadness (165), disappointment (62), calmness (60), anger (31), anxiety (14), guilt (14), joy (13), and contentment (10). Fewer of the participants gave answers that were a better fit for the following categories: confusion (4), freedom (3), indifference (3), pride (1), nostalgia (1), satisfaction (1) and eagerness (1). From all of the participants, 13 of them did not give a valid emotion description.

Most of the participants reported anticipated partner emotions that fit these categories: calm (107), sadness (94), guilt (47), anxiety (27), anger (25), contentment (23), disappointment (17) and joy (12). The other participants reported anticipated partner emotions that entered in the following category: indifference (7), happiness (5), pride (3), amusement (1), confusion (1), freedom (1), boredom (1), surprise (1), and relief (1). Another 22 of the participants gave answers that contained no emotion description or no valid one.

To assess whether there are significant gender differences for self and partner's emotions in both negative and positive situations, we conducted a Chi-square test for Association. The results revealed that for the positive vignette there were significant gender differences in the case of self emotions ($\chi^2 (19) = 32.36, p = .028$). The greatest discrepancies between men and women can be observed in emotions like contentment, calm, satisfaction or the absence of emotion. More women than men reported that they feel contentment, while more men than women affirmed they feel calm or satisfied. Also, more men than women declared that they feel no emotion. For the same vignette, in the case of the partner's emotions, it was observed that there was no significant difference between men and women ($\chi^2 (17) = 12.91, p = .742$).

In the case of the negative vignette, there were no significant gender differences for self emotions ($\chi^2 (15) = 20.52, p = .153$). In the same case, for the partner's emotions that there are significant gender differences ($\chi^2 (18) = 32.63, p = .018$). More women than men declared that they expected their partners to feel sadness, anxiety or disappointment as a response to the IER strategies they decided to employ. More men than women expected their partners to feel anger, contentment or calm.

Discussions

The aim of this study was to assess the most common IER strategies used by couples in positive and negative situations and to assess the anticipated self and partner emotions produced by these situations. IER strategies are typically used for better adjustment of the person in positive or negative interpersonal situations, by maintaining, improving or worsening the other persons' emotions (Niven et al., 2009; Niven, 2017). The type of strategy and the accurate anticipation of the partner's emotions are essential for the efficacy of the adjustment process. In addition, we investigated the gender differences when it came to the use of IER strategies in positive and negative interactions. Also, we aimed to identify the anticipated effect of the IER strategies on the self-emotions.

In the positive situation, most of the participants described affect-improving strategies, and only 2 of them described the affect-worsening IER strategies ('put own feelings first'). When asked what alternative action they would do in a similar situation, most of the answers still described affect-improving IER strategies, yet, this time more of the participants preferred an affect-worsening IER strategy.

In the case of the negative connotation vignette, when the respondents answered the first question, most of them seemed to prefer the affect-worsening IER strategies and 86 of them preferred a strategy that was from an affect-improving category. When asked to describe a different action in a similar situation half of the respondents still preferred an affect-worsening strategy, while the number of respondents that preferred an affect-improving strategy remained almost the same. An important number of the respondents opted for no action in a similar situation (from 6 to 47).

The previous research on the use of IER strategies showed that the most commonly used ones are from the humour, cognitive engagement, valuing and problem-focused engagement categories (affect-improving), and from the negative affective engagement, negative behavioural engagement, diminishing comparison and criticizing categories (affect-worsening) (Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2007; Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018). As we previously stated, we used a pre-established IER strategy classification created by Niven et al. (2009). The only categories that did not match any of the strategies given by the participants of this study were the 'humour' and the 'diminishing comparison'. None of the participants chose an action that implies humorous gestures, acting funny, entertaining or laughing with the target as a first or second option. Similarly, none of them chose to exaggerate their own importance in front of the target or to make the target feel diminished in comparison with them. One possible explanation, especially for the 'diminishing comparison' category, may come from the fact that Niven et al. (2009) took into consideration multiple types of interpersonal relationships, while this study is focused just on romantic ones. The other studies focused on the relation between teammates (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018) or staff members and prisoners (Niven

et al., 2007). Also, prototypical strategies from the ‘diminishing comparison’ category are related to the regulator’s higher achievements compared to the target’s achievements (Palmateer & Tamminen, 2018), whereas the vignettes used in this study may not facilitate the use of diminishing comparison strategies. The lack of strategies from the ‘humor’ category can be explained in a similar manner, the vignettes not being compatible with such answers.

The results showed that there are significant differences between the IER strategies preferred by men and women. In positive situations, women tend to prefer strategies that are a part of the ‘distracting’ and ‘positive problem focused engagement (stay at home)’ categories, while men seem to prefer strategies from the ‘valuing’ category or doing nothing at all to influence their partners’ emotions. In negative situations, women seem to use more IER strategies from the ‘negative affective engagement’ and ‘put own feelings first’ categories, while men use more from the ‘positive problem focused engagement’ and ‘cognitive engagement’ categories. The ‘positive problem focused engagement (stay at home)’ category contains those behaviours that are meant to show the target that the regulator is willing to make time for him/her, while in the ‘distracting’ category are found those actions that imply arranging an activity or doing something, especially for the target. The fact that in the positive situation more women preferred these types of IER strategies can be explained through their sacrificial nature (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). Women seem to be more prone to behaviours that are centred on others (Feingold, 1994; Hyde, Mezulis & Abramson, 2008), sometimes to the extent of self-neglect (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). In the same positive situation, men were orientated in two directions. They either preferred IER strategies from the ‘valuing’ category which involves actions like ‘spending time with or being there for the target’ or declared that they would do nothing in a similar situation. Men tend to be more avoidant of expression and experience of emotions (Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002), therefore they are more willing to use IER strategies that do not involve showing emotions compared to women. Also, the lack of IER strategies use can be explained by the less interpersonal oriented nature of men (Feingold, 1994; Hyde et al., 2008).

In the negative situation, women preferred down-regulating IER strategies through which they showed their annoyance with the target by either showing behavioural cues or verbally explaining the wrongs that the target had done. In the same situation, men preferred up-regulating strategies that involved making time for the target or making the target aware of their support. These differences can be explained by the different approaches of men and women to emotions. Men tend to avoid experiencing and expressing emotion (Tamres et al., 2008), hence they prefer to uplift the negative situation. Women tend to ruminate more (Tamres et al., 2008), an aspect that can increase the emotionality of a situation. It is worth noting that although the gender differences were significant they appeared for just a few of the IER strategy categories. Also, there were no significant gender differences when the participants were asked to give a different approach to the

same situation. This aspect supports the idea that there are more similarities than differences between men and women (Ferree, 1990; Fox & Murry, 2000).

In the positive situation, most of the participants affirmed that after using an IER strategy they felt a positive emotion, like calm, joy or contentment, yet there were some of the participants that said they experienced a negative emotion, like guilt, anxiety, disappointment or sadness. Most of the participants expected their partners to experience positive emotions as an effect of the IER strategies, yet there were 66 participants that expected their partners to feel negative emotions, like sadness, anxiety or confusion. An important difference can be observed between the anticipated self-emotions and the anticipated partner emotions for the negative ones. The respondents expected to feel more guilt and little to no sadness and their partners to feel more sadness and little to no guilt.

Although most of the participants declared they would use an affect-improving IER strategy, not all of them expected their partners' emotions to improve. On the contrary, some of them anticipated that their partners' emotions would worsen. Even if the IER strategies are used to maintain or change other people's emotions, we wanted to see if the respondents expected some changes in their emotions as a result of using an IER strategy. In this case, most of the participants expected to have positive emotions, yet, similar to the anticipated partner emotions situation, not as many as those who affirmed they would use an affect-improving IER strategy.

In the negative situation, the self-emotions that the respondents expected after the use of a certain IER strategy were mostly negative ones (sadness, disappointment, anger, anxiety), yet there were 89 cases when the respondents expected to feel a positive emotion. In the case of the anticipated partner emotions, most of the participants expected their partners to experience a negative emotion, although there were 152 of them that believed their partners would feel positive emotions (calmness, contentment, joy, happiness). In this situation, most of the participants declared they would use an affect-worsening strategy. Still, there were more respondents that anticipated that their partners would feel positive emotions than those who preferred an affect-improving IER strategy.

The research on the topic of IER strategies and self-emotions shows that the regulators are not immune to the IER strategies they use (Niven et al., 2012c). Therefore, our results seem to be in accord with the research, as most of the participants declared they would experience a positive emotion when using an affect-improving IER strategy and a negative emotion when using an affect-worsening IER strategy. This aspect can be explained through the theory of emotion-shaped behaviour that is an extension of the theory of planned behaviour (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall & Zhang, 2007; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). By doing certain actions (in this case IER strategies), people trigger certain emotional states that can alter the way they will do the same actions in the future (Baumeister et

al., 2007). Therefore, they will choose to do the actions that are in agreement with how they believe they are going to feel.

Limitations

Although this mixt-method approach has advantages, namely, it gives better insight into the manner people chose to regulate their partners' emotions in positive and negative interactions as well as on the anticipated results of their actions. It also has some limitations that we will address and we will also propose some solutions that can be taken into consideration in future research. Firstly, the limited number of questions and the lack of further investigations offered us a limited understanding of the motivation behind the use of specific IER strategies. Thus, a semi-structured interview that would take into consideration the underlying processes that take place when a person chooses to take a specific action with the intention of regulating their partner's emotions can bring more in-depth information about this phenomenon. Using a semi-structured interview, or even an unstructured interview, can help the researcher obtain more information and have a better understanding of the motives that stay behind the use of certain IER strategies. Also, it could bring more data about the anticipated self and partner emotions and the relations between the IER strategies and the earlier mentioned emotions. Secondly, the limited variation in the population's age offers a narrow insight into the differences and similarities between age groups' use of IER strategies in romantic couples. Therefore, a quantitative approach can extend the findings of the research to a wider population than the current mixt-method approach. The results of this study can be extended to a similar population to some extent, yet because the analysis used is not strong enough, a quantitative approach would be welcomed.

Conclusion

IER is a concept that has an important impact on interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it could have a significant effect on romantic relations too. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has focused on the relation between the use of IER strategies and self and partner anticipated emotions in couples. Thus, the results of this study bring an important addition to the literature that focuses on the relation between IER strategies and the emotions in couples. Our study highlights the most used IER strategy category in a positive situation ('cognitive engagement' with an alternative from the 'positive problem-focused engagement' category) and in a negative situation ('put own feelings first' and as an alternative 'withdrawal) in couples. Also, our study emphasizes the connection between the IER strategies used and the anticipated self and partner emotions. This study is just a step to shed more light on the emotional aspects of romantic relationships.

Our results can be useful for future research in the same domain. Also, they prove useful for family and couple therapists, for whom the results of this study can bring important information about the way the couples use IER strategies and effects they can have on both partners.

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