

Emotion Dynamics in Intimate Relationships: The Roles of Interdependence and Perceived Partner Responsiveness

Laura Sels, Harry T. Reis, Ashley K. Randall, and Lesley Verhofstadt

Abstract

Emotions are not only fundamentally dynamic in nature in the sense of varying across time, but they are also fundamentally social, originating in and shaping our interpersonal processes. Interpersonal emotion dynamics refer to the ways in which emotions and emotional self-regulation are dynamically influenced by interactional partners, given the interdependence that exists between them. We begin this chapter by describing the premise for interpersonal emotion dynamics in intimate relationships, what interpersonal emotion dynamics constitute, and the state of the art in the fields of emotion science, relationship science, and interpersonal emotion dynamics. Next, we discuss two key themes that we believe promote theoretical integration among seemingly disparate strands of research (in emotion and relationship research), emphasizing the importance of interdependence and perceived partner responsiveness in the interpersonal emotion dynamics that characterize intimate relationships. The chapter concludes with our recommendations for future research in this promising area.

L.Sels, Family Lab, Experimental-Clinical and Health Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, UGhent, Belgium. E-mail: laura.sels@ugent.be

Scholars and practitioners working with individuals and couples both recognize that emotions are inherently social and should not be viewed as purely intrapsychic experiences, as they are elicited, managed, altered, and maintained in interactions and relationships with others (e.g., Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Parkinson, 1996; Van Kleef, 2009). Emotions in intimate relationships¹ are especially of interest, because people experience, share, and regulate emotions most often and most intensely in the relationship with their intimate partner (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001; Knobloch & Metts, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Schoebi & Randall, 2015). The emotional experiences between intimate partners (hereafter, partners) are continually emerging, fluctuating, and interacting across time, which contribute to the development and maintenance of these relationships (e.g., Clark et al., 2017; Reis, 2014). As such, partners' interpersonal emotional experiences, conceptualized as *interpersonal emotion dynamics*, are dynamic in the sense of being context-dependent and thus continuously changing, and are thought to be crucial for both the individuals' and the relationship's well-being (Butler, 2011; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Moreover, interpersonal emotion dynamics are proposed to mediate the robust link between intimate relationship functioning and mental and physical health (e.g., Farrell et al., 2018; Sbarra & Coan, 2018). Therefore, advancing our understanding of how partners impact each other's emotions dynamically—automatically and deliberately, as described below—and advancing perspectives on how interpersonal emotion dynamics arise and are associated to well-being is critical for future progress in the study of emotion.

¹ Intimate relationships are particularly close interpersonal relationships that are defined by deep knowledge, interdependence, shared commitment, and feelings of caring, trust, and responsiveness (Miller, 2014). In this chapter, we mainly focus on adult intimate relationships in the form of romantic relationships, and often give examples of heterosexual romantic relationships. However, this does not in any sense imply that the proposed concepts do not apply to more diverse romantic relationships or other types of close relationships (e.g., adult-caregivers and close friends).

1. Why and How Do Partners Impact Each Other's Emotions?

A central premise in relationship science is that partners are interdependent (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), which indicates that each partner's experiences, as well as the emotions tied to those experiences, are linked. Said differently, partners influence each other in myriad and often profound ways. Consider the example of a cohabiting couple who have a baby. Because they must care for the baby, partners have to coordinate childcare, including changing diapers, staying up in the middle of the night when the baby cries, arranging logistics such as daycare, and so on. Furthermore, given that the partners share a household, they may be likely to divide household labors and have pooled economical resources. Finally, they spend much of their time together, not only in joint activities such as visiting family and friends, but also in recreation and simply living everyday life in each other's presence. Thus, both partners are dependent on each other, and because they have an enormous ability to influence each other's functioning and well-being, they must balance their own and their partner's needs and goals. As such, intimate relationships are best conceptualized not in terms of two independent persons who occasionally influence each other but instead as interdependent subparts of a single system, in which the members of the system are strongly linked. This notion is reflected in many theories and frameworks on intimate relationships, such as the transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons, vanDellen, & Finkel, 2015), which defines partners as interdependent subparts of a single self-regulating system, and family systems theories, which consider the family as a unitary interacting system (Bateson, 1972; Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Because of their interdependence, partners' emotions and subsequent well-being depend on each other's behavior to a large extent. For instance, over time, partners come to expect certain behaviors of each other and when these expectations are not fulfilled, emotional reactions are likely to occur (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005). As an example, partners may elicit negative emotions in each other not only because of unmet

needs, such as in the case of one partner not doing their household tasks (although this is of course culturally-dependent), but they can also elicit positive emotions in each other by exceeding expectations (e.g., by doing more than their share of the housework). Relatedly, partners can facilitate each other's goals (e.g., providing the partner with spare time by doing some of their tasks) or, in contrast, hampering their goal progress (e.g., demanding that the partner do time-consuming tasks when a difficult work assignment must be completed), which can result in the experience of positive or negative emotions, respectively (Fitzsimons et al, 2015; Verhofstadt, Lemmens, & Vanhee, 2020).

In turn, the experience of emotions in relationships accounts for substantial variability in the quality of these relationships (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). For instance, positive emotions can enhance closeness and relationship quality by prompting behavior that encourages bonding (Sels, Tran, Greenaway, Verhofstadt, & Kalokerinos, 2021; Shiota, Campos, Keltner, & Hertenstein, 2004; Wei-Fang, Gosnell, & Gable, 2019), whereas negative emotions can initiate destructive interaction cycles (Verhofstadt, Lemmens, & Vanhee, 2020). Experiencing negative emotions is often detrimental for relationship quality and stability, although some studies suggest that under certain circumstances negative emotions can promote healthy change in intimate relationships and thereby improve relationship quality (for an overview, see Fincham & Beach, 1999). It bears mention that different types of negative emotion may serve different functions in intimate relationships. In this regard, the distinction between soft (e.g., feeling sad or hurt) and hard (e.g., feeling angry or aggravated) negative emotions seems particularly relevant (Sanford, 2007; Randall & Schoebi, 2015). For instance, the expression of sadness is more likely to be beneficial to a relationship than anger or disgust (Gottman, 1994; Sanford & Rowatt, 2004), presumably because sadness is likely to foster a compassionate response, whereas anger is more likely to trigger defensiveness and distance.

Apart from partners' behaviors and subsequent emotional responses within the relationship, situations that occur outside the relationship, and the emotions these events engender, undoubtedly impact both partners because of their interdependence. For example, stress that one partner experiences outside of the relationship (i.e., external stress; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009) can spill over into the relationship, distressing both partners (stress crossover) (Bodenmann, 2005; Neff & Karney, 2007; Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Similarly, happy occurrences in one partner's life can lead to shared positive emotions for both (Gable & Reis, 2010). Various mechanisms have been proposed to explain how emotions are carried over from one partner to the other. Of particular relevance to emotions dynamics, partners can use each other's emotional expression, communicated verbally or nonverbally, as information to help guide their appraisal of the event (Parkinson & Simons, 2009; Verhofstadt, et al., 2016) or they can mirror their partner's emotions, which may lead them to experience similar feelings without having any idea why (Hatfield et al., 2014). Importantly, these processes typically happen almost immediately, so that they are best reflected in second-to-second-basis measurements. A good example of this is positivity resonance, which describes how one person's positive emotion inspires and amplifies the other person's positive emotion (Brown et al., in press), which in turn further inspires and amplifies the first person's positive emotions, resulting in a cycle of biobehavioral synchrony (peoples' nonverbal behaviors, autonomic physiology, and neural firings sharing the same tempo) and mutual care (Fredrickson, 2013).

Beyond automatically influencing each other's emotions, partners can also turn to and rely on each other explicitly to regulate their emotions or try to deliberately impact the other partner's emotion (Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020), a process sometimes referred to as *interpersonal emotion regulation* (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Interpersonal emotion regulation refers to a goal-directed process in one partner (the regulator) that is driven by some kind of motive (Niven, 2017) to try to change the other partner's emotion. When a personally relevant

event occurs, either negative or positive, people commonly turn to others to share their experiences, and for those in a romantic relationship, this is most often their partner (Rimé et al., 2020). For instance, when one feels overwhelmed by work responsibilities, people tend to turn to their partner for support (e.g., Collins et al., 2010; Sullivan & Davila, 2010). Another example occurs when people seek out their partner to share the news when good things happen, a process referred to as *capitalization* (Gable & Reis, 2010; Peters et al., 2018). For instance, when sharing the news of a job promotion, both the act of relating this information and the response of the partner—whether it is encouraging, disinterested, or disparaging—has important personal and interpersonal consequences (e.g., for the experience of positive emotions, self-esteem, intimacy, and relationship stability; for a review, see Gable & Reis, 2010). However, it must be noted that there is a lack of research on understanding whether or not partners are deliberately trying to alter each other's emotions (for a notable exception, see Ruan, 2021). Indeed, partners often influence one another's emotions even when they are not consciously trying to do so or when their partner is not aware of this influence (e.g., Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Howland & Simpson, 2010).

In this chapter, we do not distinguish between automatic and deliberate processes of emotion dynamics (cf., Zaki & Williams, 2013); rather, in its broadest sense, our model of *interpersonal emotion dynamics* refers to the ways in which emotions and emotional self-regulation are dynamically—that is, in a continuous and context-dependent manner—influenced by partners (Reis, 2014). This definition captures the myriad forms of interconnection between partners' behavior and emotional experience. We note that this definition is consistent with several basic axioms of many family system theories, such as communication theory (Hargie, 2010; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 2011), which posits that every behavior in an interaction is a form of communication, such that non-communication is impossible, even through silence or avoiding conversation altogether (Watzlawick, Beavin, &

Jackson, 2007). Consequently, during interactions, even behavior intended to be non-communicative provides a message and therefore has (presumably unintended) effects or influence on the other person. This definition construes causality as bidirectional and reciprocal, with both partners continually influencing and responding to each other, resulting in cycles of mutual influence or reciprocal determination (e.g., Gottlieb & Halpern, 2002; Witherington, 2011).

2. Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics: State of the Art

To date, the study of interpersonal emotion dynamics has largely been represented in two fields: relationship science and emotion science.

2.1. Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics in Relationship Science

An abundance of research grounded in relationship science has shown that when partners become interdependent, they influence each other's emotions in numerous ways (see Reis, 2001, 2014). Indeed, the important link between emotions and intimate relationships has been well-recognized by relationship researchers, who widely acknowledge that intimate partners shape each other's emotional experience, and that in turn their emotional experiences shape their relationship (for overviews, see Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Randall & Schoebi, 2018). Despite this, most relationship research on emotions has measured partners' emotional experiences and phenomena as one-time, momentary, or static between person differences, instead of investigating these processes from a dynamic perspective. For instance, partners' empathic responses have traditionally been examined as instantaneous phenomena (induced by a situation) or as a static personality trait (e.g., assessed by questionnaires; for an overview of experimental studies and assessments of individual differences in empathy, see Davis, 2018), instead of as a dynamic process that unfolds, fluctuates, and is shaped by social interaction (Main et al., 2017; Preston & Hofelich, 2012; Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008).

However, as demonstrated elsewhere in this volume (see Chap. ..), the fundamental nature of emotion is misconstrued when its dynamic nature is not taken into account (Kuppens, 2015).

Interpersonal emotional processes are dynamic processes of continuous attunement and are continually being shaped by each partner's response (i.e., feedback loops; Butler & Randall, 2013). For example, the experience of 'chemistry' in relationships has been shown to reflect emotional synchrony between interacting parties, more so than either persons' individual emotional experience (Major et al., 2018; Reis, Regan, & Lyubomirsky, in press). To capture these temporal and interactive processes, repeated measurements of emotional experiences are needed, such as by using experience sampling methods or continuous physiological recording in natural settings or dyadic laboratory interactions (Mehl & Conner, 2012). Such methods allow researchers to measure emotions as they emerge, occur, and vary across time.

2.2. Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics in Emotion Science

The field of emotion science has traditionally emphasized individual or intrapersonal processes while ignoring emotion's fundamentally interpersonal nature (for comments on this issue, see, for example, Butler & Gross, 2009; Campos et al., 2011). However, in the context of relationships, emotion dynamics depend upon the interaction of individuals in the relationship (e.g., Butler, 2011). For instance, when one partner expresses their concerns about household tasks, the feedback provided by the partner, whether explicit (e.g., by verbally assuring) or implicit (e.g., by a subtle sigh) will have immediate consequences for the emotion experienced.

Nevertheless, most emotion research focuses on individuals, investigating how emotions impact, and are impacted by, processes operating within, but not between, persons (Parkinson & Manstead, 2015). Even in research that examines emotions in putatively social contexts, the most typical research designs examine the behavior of participants who are passive

recipients of information about social events rather than active agents interacting with other persons in real-world or ecologically valid contexts (Fischer & Van Kleef, 2010).

In sum, a longstanding singular focus on understanding interpersonal emotion dynamics within relationship and emotion science has yielded an incomplete picture of what emotion is and how it unfolds in real life, restricting a full understanding of this important concept. Fortunately, with new theories and research methods coming to light, this situation has begun to change, as we describe in the sections that follow.

3. The Rise of Research on Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics

Research on interpersonal emotion dynamics has seen a significant increase in the past 10-15 years because of a growing awareness of the importance of this perspective and the availability of appropriate research technologies, methods, and statistical techniques (see Butler, 2018). Hand in hand with technology that has been created for collecting intensive longitudinal dyadic data that is capable of capturing real-time behaviors and emotions, methods to analyze and model interpersonal emotion dynamics are increasingly being developed and made accessible to a wide audience (Hamaker et al., 2015; Loughheed & Hollenstein, 2018). For instance, *rties* is an open-source R-package that provides tools for modeling interpersonal dynamics (Butler & Barnard, 2019) and Gridware is a free software program for graphically depicting real-time emotional dynamics (Hollenstein, 2013). Relatedly, flexible statistical and graphical methods such as dynamic systems models are proposed (Butner et al., 2018). As a result, researchers are increasingly able to study interpersonal emotion processes as dynamic interpersonal patterns that emerge between people, thus providing a richer and more nuanced understanding than prior work adopting static, instantaneous, or intrapersonal perspectives.

Most existing research on interpersonal emotion dynamics focuses on partners' interdependent emotional changes or how partners' emotions are linked across time (Butler, 2011; Randall & Schoebi, 2018). This work involves a broad range of time-scales assessing

emotional experiences, ranging from short-term, second-to-second assessments (e.g., Randall et al., 2013), to more long-term, weekly assessments (e.g., Cooper et al., 2020). For instance, using data collected four times a day for three consecutive days, Saxbe and Repetti (2010) examined the extent to which one person's cortisol levels and negative mood were associated with their partner's mood/cortisol levels. As another example, Schoebi (2008) examined people's sensitivity to their partner's emotions throughout daily life: how well does one person's change in emotions predict the partner's subsequent change in emotions? Such research on dynamic, direct emotional linkages revealed conflicting and ambiguous results about the occurrence, importance, and underlying mechanisms related to this question (for overviews, see Butler, 2017; Sels et al., 2018).²

On the one hand, results from these and other similar studies suggest that emotional linkage can emerge, especially for negative emotions (notwithstanding the limitation that most of this work has been conducted with different-gender couples residing in Western cultures). On the other hand, recent evidence suggests that many couples do not exhibit meaningful emotional linkages, at least in terms of the connections (e.g., linear correlations between partners' emotions) or contexts (e.g., dyadic lab interactions or daily life) that researchers have most often examined (Sels et al., 2020). Further, sometimes emotional interdependence reveals no association with relationship and individual well-being (e.g., relationship satisfaction and depression; Sels et al., 2016), whereas at other times emotional interdependence appears to be indicative of both positive (e.g., cooperation, Randall et al., 2013, or interpersonal sensitivity, Schoebi, 2008) and negative relational and individual functioning (e.g., insecure attachment, Butner et al., 2007, and stress, Neff & Karney, 2007). These seemingly contradictory findings present challenges to the study of interpersonal emotion dynamics and have forced researchers

² For a review with similar conclusions for physiological linkages, see Timmons, Margolin, & Saxbe (2015).

to step away from a primarily descriptive approach to a more theoretically defined account (Butler, 2017), to which we hope to contribute in this chapter.

4. Challenges in Studying Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics

Among the multiple challenges faced by researchers interested in the study of interpersonal emotion is the need to identify underlying situational, contextual, and personal factors that give rise to the various patterns of interpersonal emotion dynamics that have been documented (Randall & Schoebi, 2018). For instance, emotional linkages between partners can appear not only because of actual influence but also because of emotional similarity, which might reflect assortative mating (Feng & Baker, 1994; Gonzaga, Carter, & Buckwalter, 2010; Luo & Klohnen, 2005; Noel & Nyhan, 2011; Segrin, 2004). Furthermore, because intimate partners tend to live in close physical proximity, sharing environments and experiences that they may interpret in similar fashions, they may display similar emotional rhythms (Anderson et al., 2003; Gonzaga et al., 2007). In other examples, similar patterns of interpersonal emotion dynamics can arise because of automatic and unconscious emotional influences or because of deliberate influences, and because of emotions attributable to factors outside or within the relationship (Butler, 2015). Therefore, finding the appropriate match between theoretical interpretation and descriptive patterns of interpersonal emotion dynamics can be challenging, just as is deciding on the right level of specificity (Butler, 2018). For example, should a researcher focus on specific patterns restricted to discrete emotions, to the broader categories of negative versus positive emotions, to specific temporal linkages, or to specific contexts?

Another relevant challenge is intrinsic to the literature itself. In its earliest stages, research on interpersonal emotion dynamics suffered from a lack of shared language and an absence of overarching theories and research on mechanisms (Butler, 2011; Butler & Randall, 2013; Butler, 2018). As a result, knowledge accumulation was hampered. Fortunately, scholars

are beginning to develop frameworks that provide broadly useful models for describing, understanding, and testing interpersonal emotion dynamics. For example, the *Situation-Context-Person Framework of Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics* (SCOPE) framework aims to disentangle situational (e.g., support vs. conflict interactions), contextual (e.g., degree of interdependence), and personal (e.g., attachment style) factors that may contribute to patterns of interpersonal emotion dynamics within close relationships over time (Randall & Schoebi, 2018). Importantly, this model explicitly acknowledges that these factors interact to initiate, shape, and modulate partners' emotional experiences, both within an interaction and relationship over time. Also, it has been proposed that long-standing theoretical models from relationship and emotion science can be integrated in emotion dynamics research to help researchers understand how partners continuously impact each other's emotions, such as the social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011), attachment theory (Bowlby, 2005), relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), and socio-functional accounts (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; for overviews, see Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2018; Randall & Schoebi, 2018).

Aiming to further advance research on interpersonal emotion dynamics and the association with well-being, we next discuss two key themes or assumptions that often seem to underlie theories and empirical work on dynamic emotional processes in intimate relationships.

5. Underlying Assumptions about Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics and Well-being

Two discernible although often implicit assumptions pertain to existing theory and research on the nature of interpersonal emotion dynamics and its association with individual and relational well-being. First, partners' emotions are continuously influenced by one another, which can both enhance or reduce individual and relational well-being. Second, the outcomes associated with interpersonal emotion dynamics may depend on the responsiveness of the partners.

Starting with the first assumption, we have described above (under “Why and How Do Partners’ Emotions Impact One Another?”) how partners’ interdependence leads to a continuous process of influencing each other’s emotions. In that section, we reviewed literature showing that these influences can result in both improved and worsened moods, depending on what exactly is transpiring between the partners. Importantly, this indicates that interpersonal emotion dynamics are neither inherently good nor bad.

Partners can differ in the strength with which their emotions and emotional well-being are generally dependent on each other, and this can both hamper and facilitate their well-being over time. In formal terms, couples can be conceptualized as higher-order dynamic emotional systems that differ in the strength of their emotional interdependence (i.e., the degree to which the partners tend to impact each other’s emotions) (e.g., Butler, 2011; Sels et al., 2016; Sels et al., 2018). The strength of this interdependence is a characteristic of the dyad and may be associated with the quality of their individual and relationship functioning, both good and bad. For example, strong connections can help partners to down-regulate each other’s emotions in periods of stress, but can also cause them to become stuck in destructive patterns such as co-rumination or reciprocal negative affect. Timmons and colleagues (2015) reviewed evidence showing that the strength of physiological linkage (focusing on covariation between partners’ physiological state for different types of physiological characteristics such as cortisol, heart rate, and testosterone) between intimate partners was both negatively (e.g., linkage in cortisol was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction) and positively (e.g., linkage in multiple systems was positively associated with the ability to identify the emotions of one’s partner) associated with relationship processes, suggesting that indeed such linkage may confer benefits, but also may put couples at risk if they become entrenched in patterns of conflict or distress.

This conceptualization of couples as higher-order dynamic emotional systems is similar to the conceptualization of goals in the transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons et al.,

2015). According to this theory, the extent to which partners have strong links among their goals is referred to as goal interdependence (or transactive density). Goal interdependence is expected to result in “good” outcomes when partners coordinate well, efficiently drawing on the collective resources afforded by interdependence to better accomplish their goals (e.g., when partners distribute household tasks in line with each partner’s strengths or preferences). In these cases, partners experience transactive gain, or achieve better outcomes than they would individually. However, when partners have high goal interdependence but their coordination is inefficient, they may experience transactive loss and achieve worse outcomes than they would individually—for example, when the household division of labor primarily falls on one person against that person’s will. Effective coordination in an interdependent dyad is defined by having shared goal representations (agreeing on what goals to pursue; e.g., do they both want a child) and mutual relationship orientation (e.g., both partners being committed to the relationship). Importantly, when partners offer each other goal-relevant support (e.g., minding the children while the partner works on her dissertation), this support is experienced as responsive to current goals and promotes perceived efficacy, availability of resources, and desired interdependence (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018).

This principle brings us to the second assumption. The outcomes associated with interpersonal emotion dynamics are expected to depend on partners’ responsiveness to each other. Recognizing their interdependence, partners can act responsively, taking each other’s needs, goals, preferences, and emotions into account, or they can act as independent individuals, which is likely to result in conflict and suboptimal outcomes (Rusbult et al., 2001). For example, in the context of a partner experiencing work-related stress, the non-stressed partner can be responsive to their partner’s emotional experience, aiming to understand, validate, and care for their needs, or they can act unresponsively, such as by misunderstanding the partner or by being dismissive or critical (Bodenmann, Falconier, & Randall, 2016). Imagine a couple, Luca and

Emma, who are highly emotionally interdependent but low in responsiveness. If Luca experiences a distressing event, her expressions of negative affect are likely to elicit negative feelings in Emma. Instead of aiming to understand and support her distressed partner, Emma is likely to respond by feeling distressed herself, and perhaps even personally attacked, leading to unresponsive behavior that fosters an escalating negativity cycle between both partners. On the other hand, in the same case but now characterized by high levels of responsiveness, Luca's communication of distress may arouse negative emotions in Emma, but it is also likely to elicit empathic concern and supportive behaviors that helps downregulate Luca's negative emotions. Crucially, the effectiveness of Emma's support depends on whether Luca experiences her support as responsive to her needs—after all, if what Emma offers is not what Luca feels she needs, it is unlikely that her distress would abate. In this way, the important moderating role of *perceived partner responsiveness* may help explain some of the conflicting results, described above, that have been found on emotional interdependence and relationship processes in intimate partners, with high emotional interdependence showing associations with both beneficial and negative relationship processes. As such, we posit that the explicit inclusion of a clear conceptualization of responsiveness is key to advancing knowledge about interpersonal emotion dynamics, and their implications for well-being.

6. Introducing Perceived Partner Responsiveness to Interpersonal Emotion

Dynamics

Perceived partner responsiveness, a core integrative construct that encompasses many processes in relationship science, describes a process in which individuals come to believe that their relational partner attends to and supports core aspects of their selves: their needs, goals, preferences, and personal welfare (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Perceived partner responsiveness is intrinsically tied to emotional processes, as it becomes relevant whenever interactions have implications for the partners' concerns and well-

being, and thus, when these interactions elicit emotions, the partner's response engenders further emotions (e.g., feeling loved or unloved, supported or unsupported, feeling gratitude; Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Reis et al., 2004).

To be more specific, in every interaction in which a person discloses personally relevant information to one's partner, such as important feelings, thoughts, needs, or concerns, the partner's response is important to the associated outcomes. By expressing important aspects of the self, disclosers give listeners an opportunity to enact responsiveness by showing understanding, validation, and care, or, alternatively, to withhold such responsiveness (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Understanding means that the partner "gets things right" and shows accurate insight into the matters that the discloser is sharing. Validation indicates that the partner values and respects the discloser's perspective, and caring refers to affection and concern for the discloser's well-being. It is important to recognize that the emotional impact of enacted responsiveness depends on whether that responsiveness is, or is not, perceived as such. That is, although extensive evidence indicates that perceived partner responsiveness is grounded in reality (see Reis et al., 2004, for a review), it is also substantially influenced by characteristics of the perceiver, such as their personality and situationally activated motives (Lemay & Clark, 2015; Reis & Clark, 2013).

Perceived partner responsiveness has been shown to predict numerous beneficial outcomes, such as intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 2004), emotional well-being and happiness (Selcuk & Karagobek, 2018), emotional openness (Ruan et al., 2020), personal growth and sleep efficiency (Selcuk, Stanton, Slatcher, & Ong, 2017), self-esteem (Cortes & Wood, 2018; Murray et al., 2000), and even lower mortality risk (Selcuk & Ong, 2013). In this vein, and supporting our proposal about the relevance of responsiveness to interpersonal emotion dynamics, research shows that perceived partner responsiveness to emotional self-disclosures

are more strongly tied to important relational outcomes such as intimacy than to factual self-disclosures (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

We are not the first to emphasize the necessity of attending to partners' responsiveness in understanding people's emotional lives. Clark, Fitness, and Brissette (2001) have argued that perceiving that another person will be responsive to one's needs influences the expression and experience of emotions, presumably because the target's expected responsiveness lessens concerns about potential vulnerability. In turn, feeling responsible for another person's needs also influences the experience and expression of certain emotions. For instance, people are more willing to express emotions that reveal weaknesses when they perceive those partners to be more responsive to them (Von Culin et al., 2018) and experience more gratitude towards these persons (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). At the same time, people also experience certain relational emotions, such as happiness (Boothby & Clark, 2018), guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994; Baumeister et al., 1995), more often in relationships in which they feel responsible for their partner's needs than in other relationships, and apparently construe their emotional experiences and expressions as signals of caring about the other person (Clark et al., 2001). Further, perceived partner responsiveness is expected to affect emotion regulation, with responsive partners more often attempting to regulate their partner's emotions beneficially (Clark et al., 2017; Reis, 2014).

Accumulating research identifies explicit links between interpersonal emotion dynamics, perceived partner responsiveness, and well-being. For example, in one recent study, individual differences in intrapersonal emotion dynamics—emotional inertia or the extent to which emotions are resistant to change—were associated with less perceived partner responsiveness and relationship satisfaction (Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020). This research suggests that when appropriate emotional responding to one's environment is hampered, the quality of one's interpersonal relationships is impaired. Specifically, this research showed that

a lack of emotional responses to situations that one considers important for the relationship, such as conflicts, may lead to perceiving the partner as unresponsive.

Other studies reveal dynamic associations between emotion regulation and perceived partner responsiveness. For example, higher responsiveness predicts greater emotional expression (Ruan et al., 2020), while perceiving lower regard by partners predicts more expressive suppression and lower conflict resolution (Thomson, Overall, Cameron, & Low, 2018). In addition, perceived partner responsiveness seems to impact the effects of emotion regulation, as perceived partner responsiveness recently has been shown to moderate associations between emotional coping strategies and negative emotional responses to stress (Kane, Wiley, & Schetter, 2019). In the reverse causal direction, in dyadic interactions, positive emotions predict higher intentions to be responsive whereas negative emotions predict lower intentions (Lin et al., 2019).

7. Implications and Future Directions

As the field of interpersonal emotion dynamics evolves, additional research is needed on developing theories and testing frameworks (e.g., SCOPE; Randall & Schoebi, 2018) that can help elucidate important mechanisms that link relationships to various health outcomes. In reviewing recent work on interpersonal emotion dynamics, we identified several key themes. In particular, we argued that because partners are interdependent, their emotions are continuously influenced by each other, and these dynamic influences can result in enhanced or reduced well-being, depending in part on perceived partner responsiveness. By identifying these themes, we hope to inspire additional targeted research in this area. Given that interpersonal emotion dynamics can only be properly understood within their relational context it is crucial to integrate existing work in systematic, coherent accounts, supplemented by theory-driven studies that investigate the operation and impact of interpersonal emotion dynamics.

Here, we describe several questions that we think are important to address as the field moves toward a comprehensive understanding of interpersonal emotion dynamics.

7.1. Widening the Scope of Interpersonal Emotion Dynamics

Empirical research to date has mainly focused on interpersonal emotion dynamics in the sense of direct emotion-to-emotion linkages or emotional interdependence. To some extent, this focus has distracted researchers from other ways in which partners may impact each other's emotions over time. For instance, a partner's responsive touch has been shown to predict enhanced positive emotions in daily life, and this association is mediated by psychological intimacy, which is closely related to perceived partner responsiveness (Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, & Horn, 2013). Another example is suggested by research on non-conscious activation of interpersonal goals, which has shown that priming individuals with representations of significant others can activate goals, and hence emotions, related to that individual (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

Important in this regard is accounting for the role of perceived partner responsiveness in investigations of interpersonal emotion dynamics. We see three components of emotion that seem particularly relevant to perceived partner responsiveness and that warrant attention in future research: (1) emotional expressions, (2) empathic accuracy or actual empathic understanding, and (3) perceived empathic understanding. First, with regard to emotional expressions, opportunities for responsiveness arise when important, vulnerable aspects of a person, such as emotions or needs, are expressed towards the partner (i.e., personal self-disclosure). For example, social support attempts are typically initiated when partners communicate personal difficulties to each other (Sullivan & Davila, 2010). Relatedly, when something positive occurs, such as a personal success or triumph, partners have an opportunity to respond responsively (Gable, Strachman, & Gonzaga, 2006). In fact, socio-functional accounts of emotions posit that emotions serve primarily a communicative function and are

meant to improve interpersonal relationships (e.g., Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012). If so, how the partner responds to the communication plays a crucial role in determining whether or not the relationship benefits.

Second, empathic accuracy reflects partners' ability to accurately assess the specific content of the feelings that are experienced by the discloser during interactions, as these emotions occur. Empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993) is a form of cognitive empathy and determines how responsive a listener can be and how well understood the discloser is likely to feel (e.g., Gregory, Anderson, & Gable, 2019; Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008). However, although an accurate empathic understanding seems necessary to be able to respond responsively, recent research suggests that it is not sufficient, but that it must be combined with the right motivation in order to result in responsive behavior; that is, an intent to be supportive is also imperative (Winczewski et al., 2016).

Lastly, empathic accuracy may or may not be perceived as such by the discloser, depending on the circumstances, motives, and skills of the interacting persons. Evidence strongly indicates that felt (or perceived) empathic understanding matters most for people's well-being (Hinnekens, Stas, Gistelinck, & Verhofstadt, 2019; Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009; Reis, Lemay Jr., & Finkenauer, 2017; Simpson, Orina, & Ickes, 2003). The distinction between actual empathic accuracy and felt empathic understanding is important because people can feel understood in the absence of actual understanding, and because people can feel misunderstood even when their partner accurately understands their emotional state. Thus, it is not surprising that actual and perceived understanding are only modestly correlated (Hinnekens, Stas, Gistelinck, & Verhofstadt, 2019; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009).

7.2. The Importance of Perceptions

An additional consideration for future research is based on the importance of perceptions, and, more generally, the role of perceptions in interpersonal emotion dynamics.

Extensive research has shown that people in satisfied relationships tend to see their partner more positively than warranted, and these perceptual biases in turn help keep the relationship happy and committed (Lemay & Clark, 2015; Murray & Holmes, 2017). With regard to emotions specifically, intimate partners may project their own emotions onto one another (e.g., Clark, Von Culin, Clark-Polner, & Lemay, 2017), a tendency that is exacerbated by certain individual differences. For example, avoidantly attached individuals tend to perceive more negative emotions in their partners (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Fillo, 2015). In the first evidence for the importance of perceived interpersonal emotion dynamics, we showed in a recent study that both accurately perceiving and overestimating emotional similarity positively predicted experienced closeness towards a partner, while actual emotional similarity only predicted closeness through its effect on perception (Sels, Ruan, Kuppens, Ceulemans, & Reis, 2020). A similar effect has been found for similarity in other domains, such as sexual similarity (de Jong & Reis, 2014). Further, interpersonal emotion dynamics may also help us better understand how people's emotions are influenced by their expectations about how their behavior will affect their partner's emotions. For instance, recent work on partner buffering suggests that some people find ways to emotionally and behaviorally regulate their insecurely attached partners, which helps such partners to feel better and behave more responsively (Arriaga, Kumashiro, Simpson, & Overall, 2018; Simpson & Overall, 2014).

7.3. The Need for More Diverse and Clinical Samples

Investigations of interpersonal emotion dynamics have been mainly limited to homogenous, so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) samples, which largely neglect cultural-contextual influences that seem likely to impact interpersonal emotion dynamics, perhaps profoundly so (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). If researchers wish to construct a truly generalizable science, empirical studies on diverse populations are needed (Arnett, 2016; Roberts et al., 2020). For instance, same-gender couples

experience unique external stressors stemming from their sexual minority status, which might affect the way in which stress spills over from one partner to the other (Cooper, Tao, Totenhagen, Randall, & Holley, 2020). By the same token, interpersonal emotion dynamics are inherently influenced by culture, broadly defined. Different cultural values, goals, norms, and practices in intimate relationships result in important cultural differences in emotional experiences (Mesquita, Boiger, & De Leersnyder, 2016). As a result, interpersonal emotion dynamics are best understood through the cultural lens in which they occur (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). By studying interpersonal emotion dynamics with more diverse samples, we can advance understanding of how specific experiences and cultural influences, broadly defined, may give rise to and affect interpersonal emotion dynamics and resulting associations.

Relatedly, a majority of research on interpersonal emotion dynamics has focused on healthy couples, largely overlooking clinical (i.e., more emotionally distressed) couples. However, determining how interpersonal emotion dynamics operate for individuals with diagnosed mental illness may be critical before implementing interventions and trainings. Moreover, it seems likely that information gleaned from couples facing relationship distress or in which one of the partners has serious mental health issues can provide key insights about how emotions ebb and flow across partners in all relationships. As such, it is important to consider how the social aspects of health interact with the biological and psychological, as described by the biopsychosocial model (Bodenmann & Randall, 2013; Lehman et al., 2017).

7.4. *A Focus on Mechanisms*

Finally, we suggest that a crucial next step will involve investigating interpersonal emotion dynamics as underlying mechanisms and explicit mechanisms of change in relationship development, maintenance, and longevity. Most interpersonal emotion dynamics research consists of correlational studies, but there is a need for experimental and long-term

longitudinal studies, so that causal relationships can be uncovered (for notable exceptions, see e.g., Randall & Schoebi, 2015; Rohrbaugh et al., 2009). Such knowledge would be valuable for informing clinical practice and the design of couple therapies and preventive interventions. In this light, we note that many couple therapies emphasize emotional processes such as emotional disclosure and understanding, and responsiveness (Benson, McGinn, & Christensen, 2012; Christensen, 2010; Sprenkle & Blow, 2004). In their work on extracting common principles that underlie specific couple therapies, Benson and others (2012) state that “while the exact rationale and technique may differ by therapy, most couple therapies do seek to elicit private thoughts and emotions and encourage appropriate partner responsiveness to those expressions” (p. 29) Dynamic emotional processes are indeed central elements in couple therapies such as Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (Johnson & Greenman, 2006), Insight Oriented Couple Therapy (Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991), Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (Roddy, Nowlan, Doss, & Christensen, 2016), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2009). This commonality suggests that a better understanding of interpersonal emotion dynamics in intimate relationships will be fruitful in advancing these treatment methods.

Initial evidence on interpersonal emotion dynamics also suggest the potential of targetting interpersonal emotion dynamics in intimate relationships. For instance, the Couple Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) program explicitly focuses on enhancing the disclosure of stress-related emotions and an accurate partner understanding of these disclosures, and has been shown to reduce marital distress and increased marital satisfaction (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004). Likewise, a partner-assisted emotional disclosure intervention in people with cancer has shown significant improvements in relationship quality and intimacy, especially when the patient initially reported holding back from discussing cancer-related concerns (Porter et al., 2009; Porter et al., 2012). Similarly, feeling well understood, a central component of

perceived partner responsiveness, is associated with better marital quality in patients having end-of-life discussions with their spouses (Moorman, 2011). Finally, there is some process research showing that changes in specific emotional processes during emotion-focused and integrative behavioral couple therapies predict therapy outcomes (e.g., Cordova et al., 1998; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017). These studies illustrate the potential for improving psychological interventions by focusing on interpersonal emotion dynamics.

8. Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive account of the importance of considering emotion dynamics in relational contexts. Our review indicates that the intrinsic dynamic link between emotional experiences and intimate relationships should not be overlooked. As the promising field of interpersonal emotion dynamics is on the rise and is becoming integrated across disciplines and fields, we hope to have contributed to its advancement by identifying underlying key themes (interdependence and perceived partner responsiveness), and suggesting new directions for future research.

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