

**Positive Relationship Processes:  
Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Well-Being in the  
Daily Life of Romantic Couples**

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## **Abstract**

The present doctoral thesis investigates interpersonal emotion regulation processes in the everyday life of romantic couples in four studies. It addresses the general question of what are the intra- and interpersonal consequences of trying to deal in a benevolent manner with the romantic partner's mood.

The sample was composed of 102 heterosexual couples. Participants were aged between 18 and 40 years old and indicated a high mean relationship satisfaction. The studies relied on data assessed with an electronic ambulatory assessment method, four times a day for seven consecutive days, simultaneously for both partners of the couples. Moreover, personal traits of the participants were gathered at the time of the ambulatory assessment as well as six months later. Data analyses were conducted within the framework of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; they relied mainly on a multilevel framework and were completed by some structural equation models.

The following results were found: in study (a) perception of responsiveness was predicted by partner's enacted responsiveness. However, own enacted responsiveness also predicted own perception of partner's responsiveness, suggesting a projection process. Perception of responsiveness, in turn, predicted not only own but also partner's feelings of intimacy, demonstrating an intimacy enhancing effect of being perceived as a responsive partner. Mediation analysis showed that perception of responsiveness mediates the effects of both own and partner's enacted responsiveness on intimacy.

In study (b), the display of responsive touch was associated with concurrent or directly following enhanced partner's mood. This effect was mediated by increased touch receiver's intimacy toward the partner. This indicated that the benefits of touch can not be reduced to its mere physiological effects but that the quality of the relationship is determinant. Moreover, displaying touch was associated with enhanced mood of the touch giver. This effect was also mediated by enhanced intimacy. Additional analyses showed that the total amount of daily touch at Time 1 was associated with enhanced partner's psychological well-being six months later.

In study (c), thought suppression was associated with a consecutive decrease in the mood, not only of the suppressor but also of their partner. Responsive touch on the other hand was associated with a mood's increase in the receiving as well as in the giving partner.

Most central to our concern, partner responsive touch diminished the negative effects of thought suppression on the suppressor's mood, showing a stress-buffering effect of a caring nonsexual touch from the partner.

Finally, in study (d), the use of daily humor in the interaction with the partner was associated with current actor and partner positive affect. Additional mediational analyses showed that intimacy mediates the effect of humor on the partner's mood. The habitual use of humor as an extrinsic emotion regulation strategy in everyday life showed positive effects on the mental health of the partner, as it was associated with less partner's depressive symptoms.

These findings revealed new processes through which close relationships promote well-being and underline the relevance of studying interpersonal processes in a dyadic naturalistic setting. Further research should investigate the generalizability of the findings as well as the conditions and personal characteristics under which the found processes are more beneficial or possibly detrimental. Moreover, open questions remain regarding the question of gender differences in these processes. Finally, the relevance of promoting such responsive or prosocial behaviors in psychotherapeutic interventions for distressed couples or clinically impaired individuals should be further investigated.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. *Theoretical Framework*

In this first section, several areas of the research on psychological functioning where there is a need of deeper investigation are pointed at.

Since the beginning of scientific investigation of psychological processes, researchers have mainly focused on individual aspects of psychological functioning (Mashek & Aron, 2004). This was the case in different areas of research, i.e. in the domain of emotion and judgment (Clark, 2002), emotion regulation (Butler & Gross, 2009; Rimé, 2009), health (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000), psychopathology (Whisman, 2007; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004)—and more specifically depression (Coyne, 1990; Whisman, 2001) or therapy (Bodenmann et al., 2008; Whisman & Uebelacker, 1999).

All the aforementioned authors concur on the fact that it is important to enlarge the focus from intraindividual to interpersonal aspects of psychological functioning. In fact, human functioning is fundamentally interpersonal in nature (Clark, 2002). The individual experiences almost always happen in an interpersonal setting and are affected by and affect the social context in which it takes place (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Rimé, 2009).

In the domain of health and well-being, a great deal of research has investigated the importance of social relationships and the support that they provide (Cohen, 2004; Sarason & Sarason, 2001; Uchino, 2006). Lately, the emerging field of “Relationship science” (Ryff & Singer, 2000) has accumulated evidence showing that, much more than the quantitative amount of social support received, or the size of the social network, the quality of the ties are worth being looked at into more details because close and meaningful others are essential for an optimal human living (i.e. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008).

The importance of the quality of social relationships has long been considered as evident in childhood and developmental psychology. The vast literature that has been built on Bowlby’s (1969) initial attachment theory has deeply investigated the importance and relevant qualities of a good or secure attachment relationship for a healthy development. However, even if Bowlby had already mentioned that “...attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 2005, p. 154), it is only quite recently that the importance of the quality of ties to others in adult relationships (as contrasted to infant relationships) has been addressed more deeply. Hazan and Shaver’s

(1987) model of love conceptualized as an adult attachment based on Bowlby's model of attachment has had a huge impact on the conceptualization of romantic relationships and on the specification of the characteristics of a deep, intimate romantic relationship.

Clark and Mills have developed another theory that addresses the importance of close relationships. They have defined a set of qualities that deeper relationships—named “communal relationships”—have as opposed to other interpersonal relationships—namely “exchange relationships” (Clark & Mills, 1979, Clark & Mills, 1993, Mills & Clark, 1982, Mills & Clark, 1994). The main characteristics of communal relationships are that each member has a concern for the welfare of the other. When one member has a need, the other gives benefits or help to that person, even if he or she can not expect a specific benefit in return. The benefits can also be given just to show one cares. Romantic relationships, which are the focus of this dissertation, are viewed as communal relationship where there is a very high degree of motivation to respond to the other's need (Mills & Clark, 2001).

From a methodological point of view, it is also only quite recently that more adequate models and statistical tools that allow to assess more accurately interpersonal processes have been developed (i.e. Cook, 2005; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). A groundbreaking model in this regard is the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny & Cook, 1999) that takes the interdependences of the partners into account. However, because of the complexity of the data gathering and of the analyses, only a relatively small amount of studies have truly investigated mutual influences (i.e. Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Hagedoorn et al., 2011) or partner effects (Campbell & Kashy, 2002).

Another bias that has affected psychology research is general tendency to focus on the negative aspects of psychological functioning. This is again the case in several fields of research, like health psychology (Ryff & Singer, 2000) or emotion research (Fredrickson, 2001). The positive psychology movement embraces research that have the common denominator of studying the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). This field has known a great success and grown very quickly in the 2000s. It is argued that it happened because a gap needed to be filled. For example in the study of emotional processes, since the mid-sixties and Lazarus (1966)'s book *Psychological stress and the coping process*, research had concentrated on stress related emotional processes (Folkman, Moskowitz, & Moskowitz, 2004; Gross, 1998b), that is on negative events and/or the reaction they produce (Perrez &

Reichert, 1992). This field of research has yielded compelling advances in knowledge concerning the way people deal with adverse events, be it critical life events or with daily hassles (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). In the late 90s and 2000s however, the focus of research was broadened from the coping to the “emotion regulation” one, which includes also the regulation of positive affect (Gross, 1998b) and non-conscious processes (Folkman et al., 2004). However, the emerging field of positive psychology did not convince everybody and was also questioned (Gable & Haidt, 2005). A critic that was made to the field of research on positive emotion was the lack of diversity in and sophistication of the measurement of emotions. Lazarus (2003) counted among the critical viewers of the positive psychology movement. In his conclusion, he makes a claim for a “careful measurement of the emotional state of the person and the context in which it was generated” (p. 107).

The research on romantic couples has also focused on negative aspects and for several years had somewhat neglected to investigate more positive processes, like for example what keeps partners together, what protects them from marital dissolution, what permits them to deal with conflict or to stay together, also when there are conflicts (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

Finally, another lacuna in psychology research is on the methodological level. A great deal of research about human functioning and behavior and about emotion in particular has been based on the use of global, retrospective measures, hence on retrospective questionnaires. However, these later present several methodological problems and biases—the main being that results are affected by recall biases and have little ecological validity. Fahrenberg, Myrtek, Pawlik, and Perrez (2007) recommend the use of ambulatory assessment to overcome several of these shortcuts. The Fribourg research group has developed over the last twenty years innovative ambulatory assessment procedures aimed at assessing emotional processes in individuals, couples and families (for a review, see Perrez et al., 2008). Concerning the assessment of daily life experiences of family members, a special computer-assisted self-monitoring system was developed (FASEM-C; Perrez, Schoebi, & Wilhelm, 2000). This method yielded innovative results in several domains such as symptoms reporting (Michel, 2007), attribution of emotional states (Horner Ullrich, 2005) or intercultural comparison of affective processes (Schoebi, Wang, Ababkov, & Perrez, 2010).

The present dissertation is located at the intersection of the above mentioned lacunas and aims at contributing to filling some gaps in the actual psychology research and more specifically, in the domain of interpersonal emotion regulation in the daily life of romantic

couples. In the following, the theoretical background and the main concepts that underlie the four studies constituting the thesis are presented.

### **1.1.1. Health and Well-Being Promotion by Close Relationships**

It is now widely acknowledged that strong, supportive and positive relationships are related to health, both mental and physical (i.e. Berkman, 1995; Berkman et al., 2000) and that a lack of this kind of relationships is associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes and mortality (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Cacioppo et al., 2002; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Layton, & Brayne, 2010). Leaning on the likewise widely acknowledged “need to belong” of human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), there is a strong consent that it is mostly the quality of the relationships that is determinant in the positive association between relationships and health (Ryff & Singer, 2000). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong has two main features. First, people need frequent personal interactions with the other. These contacts should ideally be affectively positive, but most important is that there are free from conflict and negative affect. Second, there is a need to perceive that the relationships are marked by a strong interpersonal bond, characterized by stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future. Ideally, the concern should be mutual, like it is the case in the aforementioned communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979, Clark & Mills, 1993, Mills & Clark, 1982, Mills & Clark, 1994).

Even if the consent about the beneficial effects of close relationships is bright, the mechanisms that explain this association are not clear. In the last few years, a great deal of research has investigated these potential mechanisms.

Broadly, two main categories of mechanisms can be differentiated: physiological and psychosocial ones. As this is not the focus of this dissertation, I will not describe in detail the physiological pathways through which close positive relationships influences health.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a review concerning social support and health, look at Uchino (2006). Moreover, Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) and Robles and Kiecolt-Glaser (2003) have revised the physiological mechanisms that mediate the link between marriage—close romantic relationships—and health. Stable and positive relationships seem to beneficially influence several stress-sensitive systems on several physiological levels (i.e. cardiovascular, (neuro-)endocrine, immune, or neurosensory).

These physiological mechanisms can not be separated from and act in accordance with social, psychological, and behavioral processes.

On the side of psychosocial mechanisms, one pathway through which social relationships favorably influence health seems to be that they engender higher levels of social support (both emotional and instrumental<sup>2</sup>). Reis & Franks (1994), in a study with a large, representative community sample found that social support mediates the link between intimacy and health outcomes. Another important pathway seems to be the effect that close relationships have on affect. In fact, having quality ties to others seems to enhance positive affect and reduce the experience of negative affect (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Leaning on Fredrickson (2004)'s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, the affect enhancing effect of close relationships broadens the scope of thoughts and action and thus helps building personal, social, and physical resources. The experience of positive emotions appears in turn to promote the construction of close relationships. For example, Waugh and Fredrickson (2006) found that the amount of positive emotions experienced in the first week of new college students' roommates predicted self-other overlap between the roommates. This in turn predicted a more complex understanding of each other. Still another important mechanism linking relationships to enhanced positive affect seems to be the so called "capitalization" process. It has been defined as the process whereby people seek additional advantages from positive events by marking and enhancing them in some way (for example by seeking social contact to share a positive event or by celebrating the event) and therefore "savor" them more intensively or for a longer time (Langston, 1994; Reis et al., 2010). The experiencing and consecutive sharing of positive events seems to be very frequent in people's daily lives (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Moreover, this social sharing of positive emotions has been shown to have beneficial effects both at the individual and at the interpersonal level (Reis et al., 2010). The personal benefits of capitalization include enhanced positive emotions, subjective well-being and self-esteem as well as decreased loneliness, whereas the relationship benefits comprise enhanced satisfaction, intimacy, commitment, trust, liking, closeness, and stability (Gable, Reis, & Mark, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Cutrona was one of the first authors to distinguish between emotional and instrumental support (Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona Cutrona and Russell, 1987). This distinction was then considered as essential in the research field of social support and used in several researches (e.g. Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Matud, Ibáñez, Bethencourt, Marrero, & Carballeira, 2003; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000).

Finally, regarding the link between close relationships and health, perhaps most importantly are the theoretical accounts that integrate both physiological and psychological levels of explanations. In this regard, two theories seem of major interest. The first is the stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen, 2004; Cohen & Pressman, 2004). According to it, social resources—such as the provision or exchange of emotions, informational, or instrumental resources in response to others’ needs—will ameliorate the potentially pathogenic effects of stressful events. Cohen and Pressman (2004) have differentiated three mechanisms by which informal social relationships provide protections from stressful events. First, support may attenuate or prevent the stress appraisal, thus reducing the perceived harm potential of a situation or bolstering one’s perceived abilities to cope with the demand. Second, support may reduce or eliminate the affective reactions, dampen the physiological responses or prevent or alter maladaptive behavioral responses to a stressful event. Finally, support may alleviate the impact of stress by bringing a solution to the problem or by providing a distraction from it.

A second model of the beneficial effects of close relationships that integrates the psychological and physiological levels is the analysis of Sbarra and Hazan (2008). According to them, the mutual conditioning of biological reward systems among significant others give rise to a felt sense of security that, in turn, operates at the physiological level in reducing the stress response of several physiological systems and at subjective level, by enhancing the experience of positive emotions and felt security.

### **1.1.2. The Intimacy Process in Romantic Relationships**

As Reis and Franks (1994) have shown, an aspect of close relationships that contributes to a better physical and mental health is intimacy. So is intimacy a crucial ingredient of close relationship and in particular of romantic ones (Reis & Patrick, 1996). By intimacy, it is here referred to a psychological feeling that arises between two people. On the basis of Vohs and Baumeister (2004), intimacy can be defined in terms of three main dimensions. First, it involves mutual understanding of inner, personal material. Second, intimacy comprises positive feelings about each other. As such, it can be considered as an emotional state about a person. Finally, intimacy entails communication or exchange—and these can be made both verbally and nonverbally (Reis & Patrick, 1996).

As Bowlby (1988) already noted, “attachment theory regards the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature,

already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age” (pp. 120-121). When regarded as processes, attachment and intimacy have in common that they a) involve emotion and the regulation of these latter through interpersonal means; b) emphasize the importance of having responsive interaction partners; c) highlight the importance of prior experiences in significant relationships; d) are fundamentally relational; and e) are intrinsically related to human well-being (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Reis and Shaver (1988)’s and Reis and Patrick (1996)’s process model of intimacy has been highly influential in the field of “Relationship Science”. According to it, intimacy refers to an interactive process, which begins by a first partner disclosing self-relevant material; if this is followed by a responsive reaction of the interaction partner, this leads the former partner to feel understood, validated and cared for. This process unfolds over time and is inherently interactive; roles can be interchanged and various cycles of disclosure and responsiveness may occur over one or several interactions.

Until now, a few studies have tested empirically this model. The role and importance of disclosure in the intimacy process have been confirmed in several studies. Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) have shown that in interpersonal exchanges with any partner (acquainted or not), self-disclosure and perceived partner disclosure were predictors of the own intimacy level. These results were replicated in the context of marital interactions (Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Rovine, 2005) or with partners where the female partner had breast cancer (Manne et al., 2004). The way people respond to disclosure is as much important as disclosure itself (Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008). However, as Reis and Patrick (1996) have pointed out, research on responsiveness has been much less extensive than the one on self-disclosure. Responsiveness is a relatively bright concept which embraces thoughtful, empathic reactions that communicate respect and appreciation (Reis, 1998). It is made of behaviors intended to make the disclosing partner feel understood, validated and cared for. In that sense, it can include a large palette of behaviors. According to Reis and Patrick (1996), it can not only be communicated by verbal and nonverbal facets of conversation but can also be displayed by very concrete behaviors.

The concept of responsiveness is linked with some other close concepts. Empathy is a core component of responsiveness and can even be divided into two aspects; Reis and Patrick (1996) lean on Wispé (1986)’s distinction between empathy and sympathy. Wispé defines empathy as “the attempt by one self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self” (p. 318). This aspect seems to contribute to the feeling of being

understood and validate, whereas sympathy, which refers as a “heightened awareness of the suffering of another person as something to be alleviated” (Wispé, 1986, p. 318) is more pertinent to the feeling of being cared for. There is also a great overlap between the concept of responsiveness and the one of social support, particularly concerning emotional support (as opposed to instrumental). However, social support pertains to resources available (or perceived to be available) from others (Reis & Franks, 1994) and generally concerns (potential) situations of adversity (Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr, 1997), whereas responsiveness may also arise in time of good fortune (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Until now, the vast majority of studies examining responsiveness in the intimacy process have only studied the *perceived* partner responsiveness without taking into account the *actual* partner responsiveness. Reis, Clark, and Holmes (2004), consider perceived partner responsiveness as an overarching construct which involves cognitive (believing in the qualities of the partner) and emotional (feeling of an emotional bond with the partner) aspects. They define it as “A process by which individuals come to believe that relationship partners both attend to and react supportively to central, core defining features of the self” (Reis et al., 2004, p. 203). These processes are considered as central to creating intimacy and closeness. Hence, even if the benefits of perceived partner responsiveness for couple (and also individual) functioning are manifest, the effects of *actual* responsiveness are still not clear. In order to begin to fill this lacuna, in this dissertation, we have focused on a particular kind of responsiveness; namely concrete behaviors that show care and concern for the partner in reaction to their emotions. In the first study, we have investigated what we named “enacted responsiveness”. This construct was composed of two items; one assessing kind, concrete gestures of responsiveness and the other assessing the use of warm and nonsexual touch to show responsiveness to the partner. In the two last studies, we focus on the effects of responsive touch.

### **1.1.3. Emotion Regulation: State of the Art**

#### **a) Defining Emotional Processes**

When talking about emotions, everyone knows what it refers to and would agree that for example anger, joy, fear, or sadness are indeed emotions. Paradoxically, it has been virtually impossible for scholars in the social and behavioral sciences to give a consensual definition of an emotion (Frijda & Scherer, 2009). The central problem with defining emotions is that it is a multicomponential phenomenon, where it is difficult to differentiate

between the component of an emotion and what the emotion truly is. Scherer (2005) proposed a framework to sensitize researchers to the importance of definitional issues in affective science and to try to unify the conceptualization of emotion. According to his component process model, an emotion is “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism” (p. 697). The organismic subsystems are a) information processing, which is related to the cognitive component of an emotion (appraisal), b) support, which is related to the neurophysiological component of an emotion (bodily symptoms), c) executive, which is related to the motivational component of an emotion (action tendencies), d) action, which is related to the motor expression component of an emotion (facial and vocal expression) and e) monitor, which is related to the subjective feeling component of an emotion (emotional experience).

There is an important consent regarding the functionality of emotions, whereby emotions are considered as adaptations to the problems of social and physical survival (Keltner & Gross, 1999). In particular, Frijda (2001) underlines the role of emotion in preparing the organism for a particular behavior—the “action readiness” component of emotion. According to the appraisal of the situation, a certain emotion will be elicited, which in turn modifies the action readiness of the organism. For example, freezing in fear or “moving toward” in joy. This “action readiness” is likely to serve important interpersonal goal. In fact, some authors even consider emotions to *be* social processes (Salovey, 2009). However, if a certain emotional state is inappropriate for the situational characteristics (Perrez & Reicherts, 1992), is too weak or too strong, the corresponding action readiness will probably not lead to an adequate reaction to the situational demand. Perrez and Reicherts interpret dysfunctional emotions in the tradition of R.S. Lazarus as an effect of dysfunctional appraisals respectively inappropriate perception of objective situation features (demands) relevant for adaptation. They assume that specific properties of stressful situations—such as controllability, changeability or ambiguity—are potentially relevant features for adaptation. “An adequate perception and cognitive representation of psychologically relevant situation characteristics” is a condition for the activation of appropriate emotions, coping and adaptation (Perrez & Reicherts, p. 32). “Adequately” means that the subjective appraisal/perception of the situation’s properties corresponds more or less to the objective properties, that appraisal is sufficiently meeting the objective demands inherent to the task. *Appraisal competence* denotes the capacity to perceive, in situations requiring adaptation, the

relevant properties of the situation, and to appraise them more or less adequately with regard to the person's goals, needs, or concerns.

Therefore, the way emotions are processed, that is the “emotional or affective processing” are crucial in regard to the functionality of emotions (Rachman, 2001). The processing of emotions includes the formation, development, experience, and expression of emotions, as well as their regulation. To this regard, the concept of “Emotional Openness” addresses the different dimensions of the subjective representation of emotional processing (Reichert, Kaiser, Genoud, & Zimmermann, 2011). These dimensions are a) the perception of internal bodily phenomena of emotions, b) the perception of external bodily phenomena of emotions, c) the cognitive representation of emotions, d) the communication and expression of emotions and e) the regulation of emotions. The emotion regulation can be considered as intrinsically linked to the four first dimensions (a-d). In fact, for an emotion to be regulated, it must be perceived and represented cognitively to a certain degree. Moreover, the very communication or expression of an emotion can have an influence on the course of the latter. According to this model, the regulative dimension of “Emotional Openness” consist of a) the capacity to delay, postpone, or attenuate negative affective states (“down-regulation”) and to maintain, stabilize, or amplify positive affective states (“up-regulation”). In the following, we focus on this dimension of the affective experience.

### **b) Emotion Regulation**

Lately, the research field of emotion regulation has experienced a huge increase in the number of papers directly or indirectly linked to this topic (Koole, 2009). James J. Gross's conception of emotion regulation has been highly influential in this domain and is now a reference for the definition of emotion regulation. According to him and his colleagues (i.e. Gross, 1999; Gross & Thompson, 2007), emotion regulation is “[...] the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998b, p. 275). One of the major reasons why emotion regulation has become such an important topic is that it is inherently linked to several aspects of well-being (Gross & John, 2003). This seems at first to be evident: when one can regulate one's emotions well, one feels better. However, the question gets more complex when it comes to know what differentiates people that regulate their emotions well from people that do not do so.

Several authors have given definition of what differentiates functional from dysfunctional or favorable from unfavorable emotion regulation strategies. This has also been done in the domain of coping; for example Perrez and Reicherts (1992), as noted above, have differentiated the functionality of different coping strategies (situation-oriented, representation-oriented or evaluation-oriented) according to objective and subjective properties of the situation (controllability, changeability, ambiguity, etc.). According to Bridges, Denham, and Ganiban (2004) adaptive emotion regulation serves to modulate the experience and expression of positive and negative emotions in a way that is compatible with the goals of the individual in the actual environment. Gross (1998a) has differentiated between antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation, that is whether the emotion regulation process takes place before or after the emotion has unfold. He and his colleagues have investigated in several studies two kinds of emotion regulation strategies, namely “reappraisal”, an antecedent-focus strategy, and “suppression”, a response-focused strategy. The beneficial effects of reappraisal and the detrimental ones of suppression could be shown, regarding i.e. sympathetic activation, well-being (Gross, 1998a), amusement (Giulani, McRae, & Gross, 2008), memory (Gross, 2001), or patterns of affect and health (John & Gross, 2004). Koole (2009) has classified emotion-regulation strategies, first according to the emotion-generating system that is targeted (attention, knowledge and body), and second, according to the psychological functions that are served by emotion regulation (need-, goal- and person-oriented).

Not only is functional emotion regulation linked with enhanced well-being, but dysfunctional emotion regulation is associated with a worse mental health (Gross & Muñoz, 1995). Kring and Werner (2004) have even argued that the vast majority (85% according to Thoits, 1985) of psychological disorders entail a problem in emotional processing. Hence, as Kring (2010a) mentions, it is crucial to understand the emotion regulation process better in order to better adapt transdiagnostic treatment approaches. The latter have recently known important developments (i.e. Greenberg, 2004; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008).

In sum, emotion regulation is a highly relevant process for human’s well-being and mental and physical health. However, as the aforementioned definition of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998b) shows, a majority of research on emotion regulation locates the process within the individual. Nevertheless, there is a growing consent that emotion regulation only rarely takes places in a merely intrapersonal context (Rimé, 2007). In fact, some authors have included the interpersonal aspect of emotion regulation in their definition of it.

**c) Four Correlates of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation**

From our point of view, there are four interpersonal correlates of emotion regulation. First, one can try to regulate the emotion in the other. Gross himself differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic emotion regulation processes; intrinsic refers to the regulation of the emotion of oneself whereas extrinsic refers to the regulation of the emotions of others (Gross & Thompson, 2007). In his definition, Thompson (1994) has also taken into account the influence of others; “emotion regulation is the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals” (pp. 27-28). Despite the recognition of the importance of others in the emotion regulation processes, only few studies have investigated the influence of consciously regulating the other’s emotion in adults’ populations (i.e. in families: Perrez et al., 2005; in couples: Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrouf, 2003; Gleason, Iida, Shrouf, & Bolger, 2008; Hicks & Diamond, 2008)—unlike in the research on infants and children emotion regulation (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008), which has been universally recognized as an interpersonal process since the advent of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, in Rimé, 2009).

Second, the way one regulates one’s emotions has consequences on the interacting partner (Butler et al., 2003). Hence, this refers to the interpersonal consequences of intrinsic emotion regulation. It can be hypothesized that a maladaptive (Bridges et al., 2004) or dysfunctional intrinsic emotion regulation may have a negative impact on the close partner. One possible pathway is the transmission of emotion (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Thompson & Bolger, 1999) or the “coregulation” of the partners’ affect (e.g. the mutual influences of partner’s affective state, i.e. Butner, Diamond, & Hicks, 2007; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008; Schoebi, 2008).

A third possible interpersonal correlate of emotion regulation is the consequences on the extrinsic regulator, or in other words, the effects on the self when one tries to regulate the emotion of the other. Even if the role of positive mood or emotions for promoting prosocial behaviors has been thoroughly investigated (see Eisenberg, Losoya, & Spinrad, 2009), the effect of prosocial behaviors on the emotional state or on other well-being indicators has received little attention. An accumulating line of research shows that trying to improve the other’s mood has beneficial effects on the self—or in other words, it does good to do good (Post, 2005). For example, in a daily diary study about “offered” and “received” emotional openness, Reicherts, Genoud, Maggiori, and Molina (2011) found that the more a partner

indicated having offered emotional openness, the more relationship satisfaction that person experienced. This association was stronger among female partners. A proposed mechanism explaining the positive actor effects of prosocial behaviors in communal relationships is the projection process (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007). According to the projection's model, people project their own care and supportiveness for a partner onto their perceptions of their partner's caring and supportiveness and therefore perceive more responsiveness when they display more responsiveness to the partner. This enhanced perception of responsiveness seems to be a crucial component of close and in particular romantic relationships (Reis et al., 2004).

A fourth and last interpersonal correlate of emotion regulation is the importance of the quality of the relationships for the experience of emotions (Clark & Brissette, 2009). In fact, Sbarra and Hazan (2008) proposed a unifying framework wherein to integrate how adult attachment relationships serve several regulating functions. Several studies have demonstrated that bonding behaviors have an antistress effect, as they reduce sympathoadrenal activity and can enhance parasympathetic-vagal activity. The repeated contact with a partner followed by a positive physiological reaction forms a conditioned response to the partner. Through the help of memory and attachment representations, "...partners become internalized at the level of psychology and at the level of biology; when an adult is faced with a threatening situation, calling on a mental representation of an attachment figure can lead to psychological security and physiological calm." (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008, p. 147). These psychological senses of security and physiological calm are the optimal ground for experiencing positive emotions and reducing negative ones. Accordingly, Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg (2003) propose a framework where the dynamics and consequences of attachment-related emotion regulation strategies can be integrated. As they argue elsewhere, "[A] sense of attachment security facilitates security-based strategies of emotion regulation, which are aimed at alleviating distress, maintaining comfortable, supportive intimate relationships, and increasing personal adjustment through constructive, flexible, and reality-attuned coping efforts." (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007, pp. 449-450).

In the present dissertation, and with the help of the APIM, the four types of interpersonal correlates of emotion regulation will be addressed, more or less directly. The main focus is on the actor and partner effects of conscious, deliberated extrinsic emotion regulation of the romantic partner's affect.

## 2. Studies of the Thesis

### 2.1. General Presentation

This introduction has presented how several lines of research have recently converged to give rise to a new so called “Relationship Science” (Ryff & Singer, 2000), that takes into account interactions with significant others and has broaden its focus, integrating both negative and positive relationship processes (Karney, 2007). Moreover, the introduction has pointed at the importance of using adequate methodological and statistical tools in order to avoid biases that could undermine the validity of the results.

The present dissertation encompasses four studies that were conducted in the realm of a subproject of the National Center of Competences in Research (NCCR) “Affective Sciences” of the Swiss National Fond (SNF), directed by Prof. K. Scherer, named “Individual and social regulation of emotions in the family” (Project 51A24-104897, directed by Prof. M. Perrez and Prof. M. Reicherts). The studies are based on a data base obtained using an ambulatory assessment method (Fahrenberg et al., 2007; Perrez & Reicherts, 1996) by a sample of 102 young dating couples (*mean age* = 25.4, *SD* = 5.08, *min.* = 18, *max.* = 40). Both partners received a palm-top computer and answered simultaneously four times a day for seven consecutive days a questionnaire assessing—among others—several situational variables, mood and intimacy as well as a substantial list of intrinsic and extrinsic deliberated emotion regulation strategies. Data analyses were conducted using multilevel modeling and structural equation models.

This assessment method and the sample allowed us to begin to fill in several gaps in the literature that were mentioned above. First, all partners gave in to be in a committed romantic relationship. Thus, we could truly study processes as they occur within the realm of close and significant adult relationships. In fact, romantic relationships can be seen as the most intimate ones in adulthood (Levinger & Huston, 1990). Second, having both partners of the couples taking part in the study allowed to assess partner effects (Campbell & Kashy, 2002) and to examine the interpersonal correlates of the investigated emotion regulation strategies. Besides, the use of the APIM enabled us to control for the interdependence of the partners (Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The application of a multilevel modeling strategy allowed us to control for the nonindependence of the data due to

the repeated measurements (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Third, the ambulatory assessment method permitted us to investigate interpersonal emotion regulation processes as they occur in the natural, spontaneous context of the couples (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Moreover, the focus of the dissertation was on positive or compensatory processes in the couple, hence going in the direction recommended by Fincham and colleagues (2007).

## **2.2. Overview of the Studies**

### **a) Deeds Matter: Daily Enacted Responsiveness and Intimacy in Couples' Daily Lives.**

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Debrot, A., Cook, W. L., Perez, M., & Horn, A. B. (2012). Deeds matter: Daily enacted responsiveness and intimacy in couples' daily lives. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(4), 617–627. doi:10.1037/a0028666.

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As mentioned in the theoretical framework, a particular and crucial quality of close relationships is intimacy. Reis and Patrick (1996) proposed a process model that accounts for the development of intimacy between two interacting partners. Perceived responsiveness was shown to be a fundamental ingredient of the development of intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 2005; Reis et al., 2004). The first study investigates how actual responsiveness affects the perception of responsiveness in the daily life of dating couples. Moreover, the subsequent association of perceived partner responsiveness with intimacy was examined. A particular kind of responsiveness was assessed here, namely *enacted responsiveness*, which involves concrete responsive or thoughtful acts as a response to the partner's emotional state. Multilevel analyses within the framework of the actor-partner interdependence model showed that perception of responsiveness is predicted by partner's enacted responsiveness. However, own enacted responsiveness also predicted own perception of partner's responsiveness, suggesting a projection process. The perception of responsiveness, in turn, predicted not only own but also partner's feelings of intimacy, demonstrating an intimacy enhancing effect of

being perceived as a responsive partner. Mediation analyses showed that perception of responsiveness mediates the effects of both own and partner's enacted responsiveness on intimacy.

This first study shows that the development of intimacy in the daily life of romantic couples is truly an interactive process that ought to be investigated from a dyadic perspective. Moreover, the use of the Actor-Partner Mediator Model (Ledermann & Bodenmann, 2006) revealed new pathways through which intimacy may develop between romantic partners. The mediation analysis of processes occurring at the lowest level of analysis (daily data assessed several times a day) relied on a recently developed method, the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Multilevel Mediation (MCMAMM; Bauer, Preacher, & Gil, 2006). Hence, this enabled to investigate interpersonal daily processes using an innovative method that controls for biases due to the repeated measurements.

**b) Touch as an interpersonal emotion regulation process in couples' daily lives: The mediating role of psychological intimacy**

*Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, & Horn (2012). Manuscript under revision.*

In the second paper, the focus is more specifically on interpersonal emotion regulation. It concentrates on a specific manner of showing care and responsiveness to the partner, namely nonsexual touch. The latter has great importance in interactions throughout the lifespan and has a particular significance within the realm of romantic relationships. However, despite its importance in human everyday social interactions, the topic of interpersonal touch has not been much investigated over the years (Gallace & Spence, 2010).

Recently, it has been shown to be associated with better health. Holt-Lunstad and colleagues (2008) showed that a "warm touch" couple intervention positively influences physiological stress-sensitive parameters. However, in contrast little is known about the psychological mechanisms that could explain the association between touch and health. The present study investigates the effect of nonsexual touch (hug, caress, etc.) on the mood of romantic partners in their daily life, postulating that displaying responsive, caring touch to the partner has a mood enhancing effect. As responsive touch signalize care and affection to the partner, its effect on mood is expected to occur because touch strengthens the bonds between the partners. Multilevel analyses revealed that displaying responsive touch is

associated with concurrent or directly following enhanced partner's mood, showing that responsive touch can be considered as a favorable extrinsic emotion regulation strategy. This effect is mediated by increased touch receiver's intimacy toward the partner, indicating that the benefits of touch can not be reduced to its mere physiological effects but that the quality of the relationship is determinant. Additional structural equation analyses showed that the total amount of daily touch at Time 1 was associated with enhanced partner's psychological well-being six months later, showing that daily positive nonverbal interactions between romantic partners have long term beneficial effects on their mental health. Physical closeness leading to psychological closeness and in turn to positive affect and well-being could be an additional explanation of the association between positive relationships and health.

**c) Stroking your Partner's White Bear: Touch Buffers the Negative Effect of Thought Suppression on Couples' Daily Mood**

*Debrot, Schoebi, Perrez, & Horn (2012). Manuscript under revision.*

The third paper also investigates the relevance of responsive touch as an interpersonal emotion regulation strategy. However, here the focus is on the stress-buffering effect of a warm physical contact between partners. Thought suppression is the intent of not thinking about something. It has been shown that paradoxically increases the frequency of the concerned thought. This, in turn, seems to be linked with several negative outcomes (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000), and in particular to have a negative effect on the mood of the suppressor (Wenzlaff, 1991, in Wenzlaff & Bates, 1998). This study investigates the interplay of an unfavorable intrinsic emotion regulation strategy—thought suppression—with a favorable extrinsic emotion regulation strategy—responsive touch. Multilevel analyses revealed that thought suppression was associated with a consecutive decrease in the mood, not only of the suppressor but also of his or her romantic partner, indicating that the use of a dysfunctional emotion regulation strategy not only can affect the user of the strategy but also his or her partner. Responsive touch on the other hand was associated with a mood's increase in the receiving as well as in the giving partner, showing that it does good to do good to a cared partner. Most central to our concern, partner responsive touch diminished the negative effects of thought suppression on the suppressor's mood, showing a stress-buffering effect of a caring nonsexual touch from the partner. Thus, this study contributes to extend the knowledge about the stress-buffering effect of positive interpersonal contacts, showing that

they can help to counterbalance the negative effects of a dysfunctional intrapersonal emotion regulation strategy. This compensatory effect may be an additional pathway through which close relationships are linked to an increased well-being.

**d) Bringing in Good Humor: Daily Humor in Couples as Interpersonal Emotion Regulation**

*Horn, Samson Debrot, & Perrez (2012). Manuscript under revision .*

In the last study, a more cognitive and verbal extrinsic emotion regulation strategy is investigated, namely the use of benign humor in reaction to the partner's emotional state. Humor seems to be one possible strategy for repairing mood and fostering individual and social well-being, particularly in romantic relationships. A postulated mechanism is that it may trigger reappraisal processes that help to repair one's mood and improve coping and thus lead to improved health (Martin, 2007; Samson & Gross, 2011). The aim of this study is to explore the actor and partner effects of the use of humor as an interpersonal emotion regulation strategy on daily affect and mental health. Multilevel analyses show that from situation to situation the use of daily humor was associated with psychological intimacy and current positive affect. Additional mediational analyses showed that intimacy mediates the effect of humor on the partner's mood. On the person level, habitual use of humor as an extrinsic emotion regulation strategy in everyday life showed positive effects on the mental health of the partner, as it was associated with less partner's depressive symptoms. It can be concluded that humor seems to be a favorable extrinsic emotion regulation strategy and that this beneficial effect can partly be accounted by the fact that it helps bringing partners together, as it increases their feelings of intimacy. Moreover, the general use of humor seems to be negatively linked to the partner's depressive symptoms. Thus, in the long term, partner's use of humor in the relationship could be a preventive factor for depression.

### **3. General Discussion**

#### ***3.1. Main Results and Contributions of the Studies***

The studies constituting the present thesis investigated positive processes occurring in one of the most important kind of close relationships in adulthood, namely romantic relationships (Bradbury, 1998). More specifically, the studied processes were interpersonal emotion regulation and the construction of intimacy in everyday life. In this section, we begin by summing up the main results and linking them with some relevant aspects of contemporary research in the field of “Relationship science” outlined the introduction.

Taken as a whole, the present researches showed several pathways through which some specific aspects of and behaviors occurring in the daily life of romantic partners contribute to a better well-being of the latter. More specifically, in the three first studies, the positive daily effects of concrete nonverbal behaviors showing care and concern to the partner in reaction to the emotional state of the former showed positive actor and partner effects on the receiver’s as well as on the displayer’s intimacy and mood. In the second and third study, the focus was on the effect of a particular kind of nonverbal responsiveness, namely benevolent touch. It could be shown that, in everyday life, its positive effect on the mood of both partners was mediated by intimacy. This indicated that psychological processes—as compared to physiological—are also important to explain the possible pathways through which interpersonal touch is linked with a better well-being. Moreover, touch was not only an efficient way to increase the mood of the partner but the third study showed that it could also buffer the negative effects of an unfavorable intrinsic emotion regulation strategy, namely thought suppression. Finally, the emotion regulatory effects of another positive but more verbal way to deal with the partner’s emotion, namely benevolent humor, were investigated. It could be shown that the use of humor in daily life was associated with better mood of the actor and the partner. Moreover, this association was mediated through increased intimacy. In addition to the daily correlates of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies, the more trait-oriented effects of some of the latter were investigated. It was shown that the average use of benevolent humor over the assessment period was negatively associated with partner’s depression symptoms, an important indicator of mental health. Besides, responsive touch over the assessment period was positively associated with the partner’s psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) six months later, showing the possible long-term benefits of positive couple processes.

Thus, in this thesis, truly positive interpersonal processes could be investigated as they occurred in the everyday life of relevant close adult relationships. Having both partners taking part in the study enabled us to assess actor and partner effects of the studied positive processes and thus to contribute to highlight new processes through which positive relationships can enhance health and well-being. Moreover, using the APIM (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny & Cook, 1999), enabled us to simultaneously assess actor and partner effects and to control for the interdependence of the partners, enhancing the validity of the found interpersonal processes (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Laurenceau & Bolger, 2012).

As mentioned, the focus was on extrinsic emotion regulation strategies that were in principle considered as positive, as they all were displayed as a response to the partner's emotion and conveyed care and concern for the partner. This research can thus be integrated within the realm of positive psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005) and thus contribute to broaden the focus of research on couple processes, since the focus was not on negative dimensions of couple relationships (like conflict) but on positive (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). However, negative processes were also taken into account and the protective or stress-buffering function of positive couple processes against individual unfavorable reaction could be brought out. Hence, we could address the concern of Karney and colleagues (2007) by highlighting interactions between several domains of marital interactions. Moreover, as the analysis relied on "careful measurement of the emotional state of the person and the context in which it was generated" (Lazarus, 2003, p. 107), we could thus address some of the denounced shortcomings of this field of research. In fact, the e-diary method not only enables to overcome some methodological shortcomings, such as retrospective bias or selectivity in describing experiences, but also allows researchers to assess behavior as it occurs in natural contexts and thus enables to make different kind of information available that traditional methods (global self-reports or laboratory experiments) can not reach (Reis, 2012). This real-time assessment method is particularly important when it comes to the assessment of emotions. It has been shown that retrospective reports of past feeling as well as prospective reports of expected future feelings are often poorly related to actual experience as assessed by real-time measures. This has been attributed to the fact that feelings are fleeting and poorly represented in memory (Schwarz, 2012). It seems however that shortly after the experience, episodic reconstruction can be quite accurate (Schwarz, Kahnemann, & Xu, 2009). In the present studies, participants reported their affect, behavior and perception over the last four to max. six hours, what should enable an accurate assessment of the investigated phenomenon.

As pointed out in the introduction, four interpersonal correlates of emotion regulation can be differentiated. The studies of this thesis could address all of them. First and most important to our concern, we investigated different extrinsic emotion regulation strategies, that is how one person can (try to) influence the emotion of the other. All the investigated strategies showed significant partner effects. Enacted responsiveness (that is, showing care and concern through concrete acts) increased the partner's intimacy and thus positive feelings toward the partner; responsive touch and benevolent humor were shown to increase the mood of the partner. Second, it could be shown that the intrinsic way to regulate one's emotion can have consequences on the partner. In fact, we showed that thought suppression, as way to deal with one's own emotion, had not only a negative effect on the own mood, but was also negatively associated with the partner's mood. Third, all the investigated extrinsic emotion regulation strategies (enacted responsiveness, touch, and humor) had an effect on the regulator him- or herself. In our opinion, the positive actor effect of showing care and concern to a close partner represents a crucial and probably too much neglected mechanism through which close relationships are linked to well-being. Nevertheless, there is an accumulating body of research showing the benefits of being kind, giving, supporting or helping others (Post, 2011). However, the conditions under which so called prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2009) are beneficial to the actor ought to be investigated into more detail. The studies of this thesis show that being kind to others might be (most) favorable when done in the realm of close, communal relationships (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010; Lemay et al., 2007), as they rely on a norm according to which one attends to the other's need without keeping records of who has done what (e.g. Clark & Mills, 1979).

A last interpersonal correlate of emotion regulation corresponds to the role that the quality of interpersonal ties can play in the way emotions are experienced (Clark & Brissette, 2009). Two studies of this thesis showed that an important pathway through which extrinsic emotion regulation strategies (responsive touch and benevolent humor) are successful within romantic relationships is the mediational effect of intimacy. These results underline that the quality of the ties to the partner are crucial for the experience of positive emotions and perhaps more importantly, to a sense of felt security (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008) that allows to experience and express emotions within the relationship, regardless whether they are positive or negative (Clark & Brissette, 2009).

In sum, the studies of this dissertation add a contribution to the thriving fields of emotion regulation and relation science, by showing new pathways through which socioaffective processes are crucial for daily and more general well-being.

### **3.2. Limits**

Despite of the significant mentioned contributions, some limitation ought to be taken into account. The particular limitations inherent to the specific studies have been discussed in the articles. In the section, the aim is to discuss the limitations of the thesis as a whole.

The first important limitation concerns the restricted generalisability of the results, due to the sample by which the data were collected. As mentioned in the studies, participants were rather young, well-educated and reported a quite high relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the cultural context was the German speaking part of Switzerland. Besides, there are good reasons to expect a selection bias: the participation to the study required a quite important investment of time and of self-reflection. It is probable that a specific kind of person were ready for this investment for a rather modest remuneration. Moreover, as the condition was that both partners took part in the study, both had to be ready to invest time and energy in the study, selecting again a specific kind of couples. Therefore, the present results can not be generalized to other populations. However, significant variance at all levels (couple, person, and situation) was present for most of the studied variables, showing the pertinence of investigating the present processes.

A second limitation concerns the presumptions about the direction of causality. In fact, intensive longitudinal methods are better suited to answering descriptive or correlational questions rather than causal question, because there is no experimental control in naturalistic environments (Conner & Lehman, 2012). Nevertheless, several aspects enable to support the assumption that the association between the investigated variables follow from a causal relationship. First, they are consistent with current good investigated, supported, and acknowledged theoretical frameworks. Besides, in each multilevel model, we controlled for the outcome at the previous sessions. This method allows assessing more accurately the temporal dynamic of the investigated processes. Despite of these aspects, it still remains that lagged analyses only indicated precedence, a necessary but not sufficient condition of causality (Conner & Lehman, 2012).

A third limitation concerns the fact that the results rely on self-reported data. An ambulatory assessment method is recognized as the best method to attenuate self-report

problems (memory and estimation problems; Schwarz, 2012). Moreover, from a strict phenomenological perspective, momentary emotional experience can only be assessed using real-time self-report methods (Conner & Lehman, 2012). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that daily diary self-reports are indicators of the ongoing experience viewed from the perspective of the participant. This experience can also be subject to biases—such as lack of time to correctly answer, changes in the way an experience is evaluated, or lack of insight in the own experience. It should be mentioned that observational data could yield into a different picture of the investigated processes.

A fourth limitation concerns the analyses of the data. In all studies, we averaged the score of several items to assess a given construct (intimacy, enacted responsiveness, or mood). Thus, these variables are assumed to be assessed without measurement error. To overcome this shortcoming, a better method would be to have included latent variables in the multilevel models. In further research, it would be good to combine a multilevel with a structural equation model, such as available in the statistical program Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011).

A final issue regards the concept of responsiveness. In its traditional conception, responsiveness is a reaction to partner's disclosure (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Usually, disclosure refers to the act of writing or talking about self-relevant content (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), involving thus verbal revelation of a specific material. In our studies, responsiveness was reported to be displayed as a reaction to the partner's emotional state. This implies that the responsiveness displaying partner perceived an emotional disclosure or at least reaction in the other. To our opinion, this is a sufficient reason to validate the status of the assessed behavior as "responsive". In fact, responsiveness has been advocated to be a bright, overarching construct including reactions by which the partner reacts supportively to central, core defining features of the self (Reis et al., 2004). However, we did not assess specifically the partner's report of that emotional state or how he/she disclosed or communicated this emotional experience. In further studies, it would be interesting to investigate in which situations enacted responsiveness or responsive touch are most beneficial for the target of the responsiveness. One could expect some trait variables (such as intimacy goals; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002) or state variables (such as the level of stress, or some contextual variables—public vs. private setting) to have an influence on the favorable effect of responsiveness in daily life. Moreover, responsive touch was assessed by means of a single item. It would be interesting in future research to investigate different kinds of touch

such as specific behaviors (hug, caress, kiss, etc.) or different types of touch (i.e. sexual vs. nonsexual).

### **3.3. Outlook**

Besides contributing to the highlighting of positive daily couple process, the results found within the realm of the present thesis open new questions that would be worth to be addressed in further research.

#### **3.3.1. Cyclical Patterns**

Relying on the framework of the APIM (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny & Cook, 1999), we investigated actor and partner effects in the everyday life of young dating couple, taking into account the interdependence of the partners. However, the investigated effects were all unidirectional. In further research, it would be interesting to see whether the studied variable and processes also show cyclical, self-perpetuating cycles. Regarding the mutual influence of actual responsiveness, perceived responsiveness, and compassionate goals, Canevello & Crocker (2010) found that, among first-semester college roommates, the higher the actor's levels of compassionate goals, the more he or she will act responsively and the more the partner will perceive responsiveness. The perceived responsiveness, in turn, enhances relationship quality and partner's compassionate goals, which ends in an upward spiral of responsiveness. This shows that, at least among initially unacquainted students, such virtuous circles of positive interpersonal processes take place. It would be worth investigating such cyclical process among couples.

#### **3.3.2. Combination of Different Methodological Approaches for the Investigation of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation**

In one of the studies (b), we found that the amount of responsive touch displayed in daily life affected the partner's well-being six month later, showing the long-terms effects of daily displayed behaviors. In our opinion, another aspect that merits further attention is the influence of past interactions on future outcomes. For example, Dagan and colleagues (2011) found that previous perception of spousal support affected the later distress related to the coping with a colorectal cancer. The combination of micro- and macroanalytic level ought to be promoted in further research. It would be particularly interesting to investigate if the exchange of positive, caring or prosocial behaviors or so called "capitalizing" processes

(Gable, Reis, & Mark, 2010) in the daily life of couples can affect their later way of coping with potential critical life events (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997), such as the arrival of the first baby (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000) or financial strains (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996). This would indicate long-lasting stress-buffering effects of positive interactions (Cohen, 2004; Cohen & Pressman, 2004).

In a more general way, further research could be done to investigate more deeply the nature and consequences of extrinsic emotion regulation in close relationships. For example, it would be interesting to combine laboratory coded observations and daily diary data, in particular concerning two of the herein investigated extrinsic emotion regulation strategies. First, responsive touch, as already mentioned, has received surprisingly little attention in research in the last decades (Gallace & Spence, 2010). To combine daily diary data with the observation of shared interpersonal nonsexual touch among couples could reveal new processes through which nonsexual touch influences romantic partners' emotional states. Moreover, the observational data in the laboratory could be combined with the assessment of physiological data. This would enable to build bridges between the fields of physical and mental processes, which have been separated for too long according to several authors (i.e. Diamond, 2001; Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Second, the investigation of the use of benevolent humor in couples would also benefit from the combination of different methodological tools. Again, we believe that observing the use of humor among couples in the laboratory would enable to comprehend the processes through which it is linked with an enhanced partner mood better. This would also make possible to directly assess the success of a humorous disclosure in observing whether the partner laugh or not. We could thus look if a shared laugh is a necessary or favorable condition for humor to have positive effects on the interacting partners. Moreover, as benevolent humor has been supposed to be closely related to reappraisal processes (Samson & Gross, 2011), this would also permit to investigate whether the use of humor enables partners to tackle hurtful or conflictive themes that could be more menacing otherwise.

### **3.3.3. The “Good Partner Effect”**

An unexpected effect found in the first study (a) was the so called “good partner effect”. When one's partner perceives oneself as responsive, this is associated with the directly following sense of intimacy of the perceiver. This showed that being perceived as a responsive or “good” partner is linked with an increase in the sense of intimacy. This

suggests that of having a sense of competence and being valued as a caring and responsive partner for one's well-being is an important aspect in close relationships. To our knowledge, the only study showing similar results backs up to the nineties. (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b) found that being idealized by one's partner—or in other words, having a partner that looks beyond one's actual attributes and sees the best in them,—was associated with enhanced own relationship satisfaction and own perceived interpersonal qualities. It would be interesting to investigate into more details the underpinnings of this “good partner” effect. One could hypothesize that an enhanced positive self-view or sense of control mediates this link. It would also be interesting to look at the short and long-term correlates of the good partner effect.

### 3.3.4. Investigation of Similar Processes in Other Populations

The sample of these studies was constituted of rather well-educated, young, and healthy couples, for whom the relationship satisfaction was quite high<sup>3</sup>. An important issue to address in further research is to investigate the generalizability of the results in other populations. It would be particularly interesting to investigate whether the investigated processes are more typical among relatively new couples formed by rather young partners or if these processes can also be found in older couples. In particular, it could be hypothesized that the different (critical) life events a couple or a family is confronted with (Perrez & Anert, 2005) may alter the relevance of processes such as touch or humor. In fact, concerning interpersonal touch, it has been shown that the relational stage (from casually dating to married couples) has an influence on reports of being touch or touching the partner (Emmers & Dindia, 1995). Moreover, Hanzal, Segrin, and Dorros (2008) have demonstrated that the reaction to touch is affected by the marital status, sex and age of the touch target. These two studies show that the perception, frequency, quality and influence of touch in romantic couples differ from a population to another and underline the relevance of investigating touch as an extrinsic emotion regulation in other samples.

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship satisfaction was measured with a German version of the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; Hendrick, 1988; Sander & Böcker, 1993). The mean score was 30.97—corresponding to a score between satisfied and very satisfied; min. = 16 (*unsatisfied*); max. = 35 (*very satisfied*).

But perhaps what appears to be the most relevant field of investigation in further research is how interpersonal emotion regulation processes take place in the realm of psychopathological disorders. As mentioned, the vast majority of psychological disorders entail a problem in emotional processing (Kring & Werner, 2004). The present thesis contributed to reveal interpersonal processes through which healthy emotion regulation occurs in a nonclinical sample. Several questions ought to be addressed in further research concerning interpersonal emotion regulation and psychopathology. It can be postulated that the positive processes investigated in this thesis might be impaired in several ways. The major possible reason of this impairment will probably be that the quality and even quantity of interpersonal interactions are often affected by psychopathology (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997; Horowitz, 2004). Thus, it is probable that the processes highlighted here will be different in distinct psychopathological disorders. This issue appears to us to be particularly impelling because the difference in the effects can be expected to go in either direction. For example, Dagan and colleagues (2011) found that among people affected by colorectal cancer, those low in personal control—and thus more vulnerable to psychopathological diseases (Badger, 2001)—most benefited from partner's supportive behaviors. This would suggest that in clinical populations, interpersonal emotion regulation may show stronger effects. However, the contrary can also be expected. In fact, several lines of research show that people affected by psychological disorders may benefit less from positive interpersonal behaviors than the normal population (Rehman, Gollan, & Mortimer, 2008). Coyne (1990)'s interpersonal theory of depression states that, when an individual is depressed, that person seeks reassurance and support from others in the environment. Initially, partners in the environment yield to these demands, but as time progresses and the demands continue, the depressive's behavior produces increasing hostility and resentment in others. On the long-term, depressive people benefice always less from the support of other. This theory has received mixed support. However, it is in the realm of romantic relationships that the empirical support was strongest. This shows that people affected by psychopathological disorders have other kinds of interactions and thus, that interpersonal emotion regulation may show another picture among this population.

In any case, much remains to be done to link the field of affective science with the one of psychopathology. As Kring (2010b) suggests, “the continued partnership between basic affective scientists and neuroscientists and psychopathology researchers will yield a far richer body of work on the descriptions of emotion-related difficulties, the mechanisms

contributing to these difficulties, and the focal treatments, both psychosocial and pharmacological, that will provide relief from the more disabling emotion-related disturbances. “ (p. 226).

### **3.3.5. Consequences for Psychotherap Research**

To our opinion, some consequences can be drawn from the present work regarding research on psychotherapeutic interventions.

A first consequence concerns couple therapy. The major reason why couples seek conjoint therapy is because of threats to the security and stability of their relationships with the most significant attachment figures of adult life (Johnson & Denton, 2002, in Gurman, 2008). “Traditional” cognitive-behavioral interventions for couples stress the importance of problem-solving and communication skills (Bodenmann, 2004; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992). However, lately, a wide variety of sophisticated and clinically relevant questions about couple therapy have been addressed in research (Gurman, 2008). The present work underlines the importance of small but concrete gestures that show responsiveness and concern in the daily life of nondistressed couples. The importance of positive and supportive processes in couples as a means to compensate for negative or conflictive processes has already been emphasized (i.e. Bodenmann et al., 2008; Bradbury & Karney, 2004). Touch in particular, which was shown to be frequently performed in couples and to be linked to intimacy and to a better mood, could be an important aspect to promote among couples seeking therapeutic support. It should of course be necessary to see whether the promotion of touch couple be easily promoted among couples. Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, and Light (2011) have shown that after a brief intervention enhancing partner support through “warm touch”, the effects of stress on the oxytocin of partners with subclinical depression was lessened, indicating a diminished sensitivity to stress. It would be interesting to investigate whether distressed couples also could be willing to engage in such a “warm touch” intervention. More generally, the integration of more behaviorally-oriented (as opposed to verbally-oriented) gestures in couple therapy should be given more attention in further research.

Lately, a greater importance has been given to the implication of the romantic partner in the therapy of individuals affected by psychological disorder (Gurman, 2008). Concerning the therapy of depression in particular, Beach, Dreifuss, Franklin, Kamen, and Gabriel (2008) advocate the overt expression of caring gestures at beginning of marital therapy for

depression in order to counterbalance the global pessimism about the relationship that often prevails at the beginning of the therapy. Promising effects could already be shown. As mentioned earlier, Holt-Lunstad and colleagues (2011) showed the positive effects of a “warm touch” intervention on stress-parameter of couples. It would be interesting to test whether such interventions also show effects on psychological measures of stress and well-being.

A last implication for single therapy concerns the beneficial effect of prosocial behavior. In our studies, we found that trying to regulate upward the emotional state of the partner was associated with better individual outcomes (better shortly following mood and intimacy as well as increased perceived partner responsiveness). Other authors have underlined the benefits of giving (Clark et al., 2010), of caregiving (Feeney & Collins, 2003) or of sacrifice (Kogan et al., 2010) in the realm of romantic relationships. Leaning on these results, one could argue that encouraging generous, prosocial behaviors toward relevant partners should be promoted for increasing individual well-being. However, it would be important to investigate the conditions under which prosocial behavior are beneficial in clinical populations and to examine the applicability of such a hypothesis as well as the potential risks associated with these prosocial behaviors (e.g. being overwhelmed by helping tasks; Post, 2005).

### **3.3.6. Gender Differences: Myth or Reality?**

Considering all variables and results of the studies of this thesis, only few and small gender differences were detected. On average over the assessment week, women indicated more often having responsively touched their partner as men did. Moreover, men indicated having perceived more responsiveness in their female partner than did women in their male partner. Otherwise, no other gender difference was found in the mean level of the studied variables. Concerning the effects, no gender differences were found in the first three studies (a), b), and c). The effect of daily humor on the partner’s concurrent or directly following mood was only found regarding the influence of women on men. Another gender difference was found in the actor effect of average humor on own depressive symptoms; this effect was only significant in women (see study d).

A first possible explanation of the scarcity of gender differences concerns the behaviorally oriented features of the studied behaviors (enacted responsiveness, responsive touch). Some authors have argued that men and women constitute different gender cultures

(i.e. Wood, 2000), particularly regarding the provision and receipt of emotional support. According to this “Different Cultures Thesis”, women tend to value close relationships for their expressive qualities, whereas men value relationships for their instrumental features. According to this view, women prefer to communicate and seek closeness through verbal disclosure whereas men favor nonverbal ways of closeness, such as shared activities or giving and receiving instrumental support (Wood & Inman, 1993). Thus, one could hypothesize that, when communicated nonverbally and in concrete ways, responsiveness could be equally valued and appreciated by both genders; by woman because of the caring quality conveyed and by men because of the concrete aspect of it.

However, the Different Culture Thesis has been seriously questioned. Still more, several reviews of literature have pointed at the invalidity of this thesis (Burlison & Kunkel, 2006; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burlison, 2004). The evidence speaks much more in favor of a similar culture with regard of supportive communication<sup>4</sup>. Men and women have been found to view emotional support skills as more important than instrumental skills in the context of various personal relationships. Both genders frequently prioritize emotion-focused goals over problem-focused goals when providing support to distressed others. Moreover, both genders perceive and experience masculine low person-centered comforting messages as relatively insensitive and ineffective. Finally, both indicate that they prefer seeking comfort from women in times of trouble and distress. Only few and small gender differences could be identified regarding supportive communication. Women are more likely than men to provide emotional support to others, to seek emotional support from others, to focus on emotions while providing support, and to use high person-centered comforting messages in the effort to relieve distress. Thus, similarities seem to outweigh differences in this domain and the Different Culture Thesis has been qualified as a myth.

Our results rather go in this direction: only few, small and somewhat inconsistent gender differences were found in the present studies, showing greater similarities than differences in the interpersonal emotion regulation processes investigated here. Still, further research would help clarify the size of the found differences, their nature (i.e. Are they due to socialization processes? Are they better accounted by other explaining variables?) as well as

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<sup>4</sup> This concept includes supportive behaviors, evaluations of supportive communication skills, responses to supportive messages, and goals when providing support. To our opinion, responsiveness can be included as an aspect of supportive communication.

whether these potential differences may have implications for the well-being of male and female romantic partners.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The present studies were carried out in the realm of the project “Individual and social regulation of emotions in the family” of the NCCR “Affective Sciences” for the realization of the author’s PhD thesis. They are inserted at the intersection of several lines of contemporary research: “Relationship Science” (Ryff & Singer, 2000) as the investigation of the relevance of interpersonal processes and in particular of close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); positive psychology, as a shift in the focus from negative to more resource-oriented processes (Fincham et al., 2007; Fredrickson, 2001; Gable & Haidt, 2005); affective sciences (Scherer, 2005) and in particular the domain of emotion regulation (Gross, 2007); and finally, daily-diary research, as the investigation of processes as they occur in people’s naturalistic context (Fahrenberg et al., 2007; Mehl & Conner, 2012).

The present work investigated interpersonal emotion regulation processes in the everyday life of rather young dating couples and addressed the general question of what are the intra- and interpersonal consequences of trying to deal in a benevolent manner with the romantic partner’s mood. It benefited from recent methodological improvement, both regarding the data collection (ambulatory assessment or e-diary) and the data analyses (structural equation and multilevel analyses). Hence, it enabled to tackle the general question of how interpersonal processes are beneficial for the health and to study these aspects at a microanalytic level (four times a day). Moreover, the combination of daily diary data with global retrospective measures allowed to look at more global consequences of daily behaviors (Nezlek, 2007).

The results revealed new pathways through which close relationships promote well-being, leaning on the daily processes occurring in one of the most relevant relationships in adulthood, namely, romantic relationships. It underlined the relevance of small gestures showing care and concern for the partner, that seem to happen often in the daily life of romantic couples but that nevertheless have been little investigated by scholars.

Further research should address the question of the generalizability of the findings. It could also investigate in more details under which conditions and by which personal characteristics the found processes are more beneficial respectively if there are conditions under which they can be detrimental. Moreover, the question of gender differences in these

processes could be further refined. Finally, the relevance of promoting such responsive or prosocial behaviors in psychotherapeutic interventions for distressed couples or clinically impaired individuals should be further investigated.

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Je déclare sur mon honneur que ma thèse est une œuvre personnelle, composée sans concours extérieur non autorisé, et qu'elle n'a pas été présentée devant une autre Faculté.