




The Role of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation in Couples' Relationships: Grounded Theory

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Abstract

Background: Interpersonal emotion regulation is a crucial skill that underpins the emotional dynamics in couples' relationships. In regulating interpersonal emotions, couples not only focus on their own emotions but also consider the emotions of their partner.

Objectives: The study aimed to explore the role of interpersonal emotion regulation in couples' relationships.

Methods: This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory strategy. Married women and men from Yazd (2021) who met the inclusion criteria participated in semi-structured interviews conducted through purposeful sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. A total of 20 individuals (13 women and 7 men) were included in the study. Data were analyzed using MaxQDA 2020 software.

Results: Collecting and coding the data with the Strauss and Corbin method, as open, axial, and selective coding, gave us 229 open codings, 32 axial codings, 7 selective codings, and one nuclear or core category under the title of safe attachment. The major categories included: Personal development, emotional safety, emotional self-awareness, empathic attunement, comprehensive support, comprehensive improvement of quality of life, and promotion of the spousal-safe base. A paradigm model was drawn from the components of the central phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Conclusions: The specification of effective factors in the formation of interpersonal emotion regulation and the research paradigm model enables the accurate identification of strategies for interpersonal emotion regulation and their consequences in couple relationships, facilitating the progression of couples towards safe attachment. It is suggested that family counselors and therapists use these results to help couples.

Keywords: Couple, Emotional Regulations, Grounded Theory, Interpersonal Relations, Qualitative Research

1. Background

The dynamics of couple relationships pose significant challenges within the institution of marriage, encompassing a crucial component of interpersonal communication and societal organization. Serving as the cornerstone of familial connections and a model for forthcoming generations, the couple relationship is widely regarded as the fundamental human bond, highlighting the paramount importance placed upon its resilience and enhancement (1). Similar to other intimate connections,

the enduring nature of a couple's relationship necessitates the regulation of emotions (2).

Emotion regulation is an important element for success in interpersonal relationships (3). Interpersonal emotion regulation is a related but distinct phenomenon from intrapersonal emotion regulation. It involves a person's tendency to share their emotional states with others to reduce negative emotions in their presence or to influence the emotions of others (4).

Couples who effectively regulate their spouse's emotions and apply practical strategies to manage each other's emotions experience greater interpersonal

intimacy and secure attachment within the relationship (5). Additionally, they demonstrate proficiency in anticipating both their own and their partner's future emotional experiences (6). Prioritizing the emotional well-being of one's partner significantly reduces interpersonal distress and feelings of helplessness in the relationship (7).

The use of positive emotional regulation strategies by couples leads to increased levels of marital satisfaction, which in turn fosters higher satisfaction in their partner, a trend observed across all genders (8). Interpersonal emotion regulation is more effective than intrapersonal regulation strategies in alleviating emotional distress and confusion within the partnership (9). Conversely, the use of negative interpersonal emotion regulation techniques in marriage, such as emotional suppression and inadequate emotional expression, can result in psychological issues including disillusionment, self-dissatisfaction, marital dissatisfaction, feelings of isolation, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (10).

While suppressing emotions during conflicts may reduce aggression, it also diminishes the expression of negative emotions, indirectly influencing a partner's strategies for emotion regulation (11). Couples who share more emotional experiences tend to have higher relationship quality, particularly when these shared experiences are positive, as they play a vital role in sustaining the relationship. Shared emotional experiences are stronger predictors of relationship quality than individual emotional experiences (1).

The maintenance of a relationship is closely linked to the emotional encounters of one's partner (12). The interpersonal strategies that couples commonly use to regulate each other's emotions are significant predictors of their own future emotional experiences as well as those of their partner (6).

What has occupied the researcher's mind is the question of how emotional regulation occurs within couples' relationships and what its positive and negative aspects are. Research (13) has shown that emotional regulation can influence the mood of both the spouse and children. Neglecting a spouse's feelings and emotions may increase the likelihood of divorce (14), whereas responsiveness from a wife can enhance intimacy, love, and marital relationships (15).

By using qualitative research, this secret can be revealed in depth. Therefore, the research questions are: How is interpersonal emotion regulation formed in couple relationships? What strategies do couples use to regulate their spouses' emotions? What is the role of

interpersonal emotion regulation strategies in the life of couples?

A determining factor in interpersonal emotion regulation, especially in collectivist societies, is the cultural context that affects the strategies adopted by individuals in interpersonal emotion regulation (16). Therefore, we considered it necessary to design and conduct comprehensive and practical research using an in-depth method in Iran.

2. Objectives

This study aims to explore the role of interpersonal emotion regulation in couples' relationships. The objective is to gain a deep understanding of how couples regulate their own emotions and their partner's emotions on an interpersonal level, contributing to increased marital satisfaction.

3. Methods

The research was qualitative and based on grounded theory. The population under study included all couples in Yazd in 2021. The sampling method was purposeful and snowball, and semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria: (1) Informed consent of eligible individuals to participate in the research; (2) at least two years since the beginning of cohabitation; (3) being at least 18 years old. The exclusion criteria: (1) Having filed for divorce or being in one stage of separation; (2) suffering from acute psychological problems.

Finally, 20 married individuals (7 men and 13 women), including 4 couples, were selected for the study. Interviews were conducted in person with 13 participants, while the remaining 7 participants were interviewed remotely due to the COVID-19 situation. These remote interviews were conducted via video or phone calls using WhatsApp software.

The selection of participants for in-person interviews followed the snowball sampling method, where couples who were interviewed face-to-face introduced other individuals with similar conditions to the researcher.

3.1. Procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted with couples based on Strauss and Corbin's 1998 approach. Permission was obtained from participants, with assurances of trust, confidentiality, and anonymity during the research process. Consent was also given to record the interviews to ensure the accurate transcription of the interview text. Before the research

questions were posed, brief explanations about the definition of emotions and the meaning of positive and negative emotions were provided to participants for better understanding.

The current research employed a multi-angle investigation approach to achieve the reliability criterion. In more than half of the interviews, the perspectives of both partners (men and women) were observed and examined regarding their emotional experiences and the regulation of these emotions in their interpersonal relationships. This was essential, as the research focused on the interpersonal emotional experiences of couples. To ensure compatibility, the facts presented by the interviewees were cross-verified with those presented by the researcher. Additionally, interviewees were asked to review and evaluate the general findings of the study and provide feedback to validate the findings. For the confirmability criterion, the researcher's data and interpretations were corroborated using available supporting documents.

4. Results

This research reported the participants' age range as 25 - 67 years and their marriage duration as 2 - 40 years, representing the minimum and maximum age and marriage duration averages. The number of children among the participants ranged from 0 to 3.

The educational levels of participants were as follows: MSc: Nine participants (6 women and 3 men); BSc: Eight participants (6 women and 2 men); Diploma: Three participants (2 men and 1 woman)

Details of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding are presented in [Table 1](#).

4.1. Personal Development

Personal development refers to the awareness and ability of each partner to regulate their intrapersonal and interpersonal emotions. At the beginning of an emotional relationship, couples may lack sufficient understanding of each other's moods and emotions. In such cases, the personal development of each partner plays a crucial role in shaping positive or negative interpersonal emotion regulation within their emotional relationship.

Participant 4, 52 years old: "An individual's personality also has an effect, for example, not being self-centered, because if he is self-centered, he says it is not a matter for me and he doesn't care at all how the other person feels ... only his calming down is important."

4.2. Emotional Safety

The concept of emotional safety implies that couples can express both positive and negative emotions without fear of judgment or blame. The relationship between partners should foster a safe space where they can engage in emotional self-disclosure, explore each other's inner world, and feel free from the fear of being judged by their spouse.

Participant 19, 43 years old: "All these differences and problems between husband and wife arise from concealing affairs, fear, and not being friends of the husband and wife and not being comfortable. If they are like two friends, all this is corrected. There should be no fear because if there is fear, it will be followed by concealing and discouragement. The relationship will be cold."

4.3. Emotional Self-awareness

Self-awareness in emotional and intimate relationships during adulthood is as important as awareness and understanding of interpersonal emotions. A couple's awareness of their own emotions significantly influences their emotional interactions. When couples correctly identify their emotions and confront them effectively within an interpersonal relationship, they manage their relationships more efficiently. Efforts to avoid ineffective emotion regulation strategies and overcome interpersonal challenges are key to successful emotion regulation. The ability of spouses to understand, tolerate, and accept unmet needs while regulating their emotions is as critical as emotional repair and change brought about by a spouse's responsiveness. Together, these aspects establish a foundation of intimacy between couples, fostering stability and continuity in marriage.

Participant 12, 37 years old: "Previously, I used to look for pretexts to vent my anger, arguing, disrespecting, yelling, and it caused us to keep getting away from each other. We were all angry..., but now when we are upset, we try to give each other some time, and then talk about how we felt in that situation, what we were thinking."

4.4. Empathetic Attunement

Empathy and attunement refer to understanding a spouse's emotions, perceiving their mental experiences, and sometimes sharing or aligning with their emotional states. This includes validating their emotions and engaging in constructive, empathetic conversations. Through empathy, couples can better understand each other's internal conflicts, emotional

Table 1. Sub-categories, Major Categories, and Core Category of the Research

Selective Coding and Axial Coding	Open Coding
Safe attachment	
Personal development	Personality characteristics/family education/raising awareness/social learning/person's approach/ learned experience
Emotional safety	Trying to discover each other's inner world/trying to get to know the spouse/openess to emotional experiences/safe response/safe emotional expression
Emotional self-awareness	Managing negative emotions/not using negative strategies/overcoming some interpersonal challenges
Empathic attunement	Concern/emotional engagement/intelligent adaptability/validation of emotional experiences/empathic listening/safe conversation
Comprehensive support	Cognitive emotional support/behavioral support/days of care/safe relationship support
Comprehensive improvement of quality of life	Improving relationships with spouse's family/improving sexual relationship/improving relationship with children/establishing peace/efficiently solving interpersonal issues
Promoting the spousal-safe base	Positive synergy/strengthening interpersonal positive emotions/facilitating the internalization of the spouse's inner world/safe self-disclosure

pain, and inner world. Empathy often resolves discomfort without requiring full agreement between spouses. Many negative emotions and discomforts in couple relationships arise not from problems themselves but from a lack of empathy and the inability to understand one another.

Participant 19, 43 years old: "When I have a difficult situation and I feel bad, somehow, if I am not right, but my wife says, in that situation, that you are right, you may be upset, this calms down me. Maybe later I will be convinced that I was not right. But she should be with me then, and if she stands against me, I will feel worse."

4.5. Comprehensive Support

A major foundation of a healthy family is spousal support. It plays a critical role in maintaining the flow of life and increasing the couple's affection for each other. In a successful marriage, couples support each other in any situation. Life can often be filled with stress and anxiety, and without spousal support, these difficulties can become overwhelming. As the closest individuals in each other's lives, spouses can alleviate stress and anxiety through their support. Comprehensive spousal support, especially in challenging situations where unpleasant emotions are experienced, indirectly moderates interpersonal emotions. It also directly enhances emotional self-regulation by increasing individual resilience, strengthening the bond between the couple, and fostering feelings of security and mental peace.

Participant 17, 62 years old: "My spouse can affect my mood with her words and behavior. When i see she is trying to make me feel better with a series of small actions, I say to myself that she is doing this for me. She is worried about me. Why do I break her heart? Even if I'm not well, I'll pretend that I'm well. It's very effective."

4.6. Comprehensive Improvement of the Quality of Life

Quality of life encompasses self-satisfaction, family well-being, and the health of one's spouse and children. When a person is satisfied with their family life, this satisfaction tends to extend to other areas of life. Enhancing the quality of married life through practical and tangible solutions contributes to a more stable relationship and better interaction between spouses.

Participant 14, 39 years old: "Calmness is very important in life. Calmness increases life efficiency in all aspects, emotionally, financially, and work. When you are fully focused, you can plan everything... We agreed to try for our calmness. When we both are calm, we help each other a lot."

4.7. Promoting the Spousal-Safe Base

The safer the space between spouses, the more easily they can express their emotional needs and be open to their partner's emotional world. This creates harmony in the relationship, enabling both partners to thrive and succeed as a cohesive unit. Couples in such relationships are better equipped to understand and accept their partner's emotional states and experience more positive and shared emotions.

Participant 8, 45 years old: "It's very easy for me to tell him about any problem, whether it's about himself or others... I tell him my feelings... This helps me a lot... because I saw he doesn't take a position towards me and is always on my side. I don't see the need to use politics in my relationship with him, unlike my other relationships."

At the end, a paradigm model was drawn from the components of the central phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences (Figure 1).

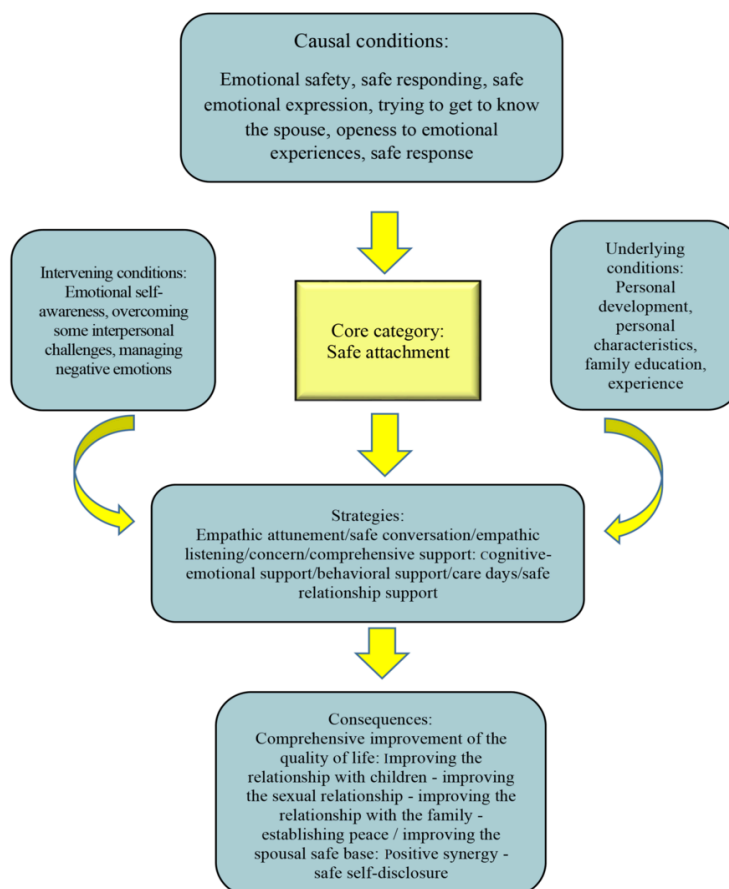


Figure 1. The paradigm model

5. Discussion

After completing the data analysis stages and identifying the main phenomenon of the research along with outlining the paradigmatic model, the research questions can be answered based on the participants' insights:

(1) How is interpersonal emotion regulation formed in couples?

Couples who have established strong foundations in their relationships and created a safe emotional base are more likely to use efficient interpersonal emotion regulation strategies. These couples individually exhibit more adaptive personality traits and upbringing characteristics, making them more open to change and increasing their awareness to enhance their emotional relationships. Spouses who continually work to improve

their relationship and adopt effective patterns to strengthen their emotional experiences tend to have a more positive and hopeful outlook on the future of their relationship. Individual differences, such as personality traits and the situational context of the couples, significantly affect their emotional experiences (17, 18). Research has shown that the relationship between parents and their children can influence marital intimacy by shaping emotional acceptance (19). Additionally, social interactions among married women play a role in regulating their emotions (20).

(2) What strategies do couples use to regulate their spouses' emotions?

Couples who perceive their spouses as independent individuals with unique emotional needs and specific emotion regulation strategies make purposeful efforts to understand their partner's inner world and establish

mutual emotional understanding. These couples engage in self-disclosure to express their inner feelings and emotions while simultaneously attempting to discover their partner's emotional world. The ability to identify emotions is a crucial skill for creating and maintaining intimacy between spouses (21). Sharing both positive and negative emotional experiences, rather than suppressing or hiding them, can enhance the quality of the relationship by fostering a sense of closeness and intimacy (22). Achieving and maintaining emotional balance depends on each spouse's ability to regulate emotions effectively, and enhancing these skills can significantly improve the quality of the marital relationship (2, 23). Spouses participate in each other's emotional experiences by reaching a shared understanding of their partner's emotions. Effective participation in these experiences depends on several preconditions. Couples should avoid negative mutual excitement and increase emotional self-management when their partner is in discomfort. They should also create a judgment-free space that allows their partner to express their emotions fully without fear of self-censorship. Research by Saemi et al. found that couples who are more accepting of negative emotions and act with greater awareness enhance their partner's responsiveness and establish a secure emotional environment. This leads to greater interpersonal compatibility within the relationship (24). Prioritizing a partner's emotions is a critical factor in reducing distress and feelings of helplessness for both the individual and their emotional partner (7). It is noteworthy that such a situation requires the establishment of a safe emotional atmosphere between couples. Spouses should be able to express their concern correctly, both verbally and non-verbally, through actions such as asking about their spouse's feelings, physical contact, hugging, being present in sensitive situations, showing extra attention during times of care, or even by providing opportunities for their spouse's privacy. In addition to expressing concern, couples should create a conducive space for their partner to freely express their emotions, based on an understanding of their spouse's emotional world gained through openness and mutual emotional responsiveness. The feeling of being heard is crucial for moderating emotions. When a spouse feels that their partner is empathetically listening to their pleasant and unpleasant emotions without judgment or labeling, and acknowledges their feelings regardless of the emotions they are experiencing, they perceive the atmosphere as safe. This leads to a reduction in negative emotions and an enhancement of positive emotions. Research has shown that the most significant barriers to

establishing intimacy in relationships are the inability to listen actively, listening selectively or defensively, and listening with the intention of changing the spouse's attitude (25).

It is an essential interpersonal emotion management strategy for couples to value each other's emotions. Safe conversation was also identified as a key strategy. Couples regarded the ability to empathetically discuss their feelings and emotions with one another as beneficial not only for gaining a more accurate understanding of each other but also as a form of encouragement. It fosters a sense of being understood, having an empathetic companion, and having a spouse who accurately understands their situations and serves as a compassionate guide in life.

Correctly understanding a spouse's feelings and offering cognitive-emotional support, along with the mentioned strategies, is crucial. Couples in a state of emotional arousal may struggle to manage all aspects of a given situation effectively. Spousal companionship and assistance in providing a broader perspective, following emotional engagement and empathy, play a significant role in regulating and recovering emotions. The more couples understand their emotions, discuss them openly, engage in cognitive participation, and express their positive emotions, the more effectively they can resolve negative emotions and inevitable conflicts in their relationship. This leads to greater marital satisfaction (2, 6, 26). The categories of empathy, self-disclosure, deep understanding of a spouse's emotional needs, acceptance, expression of thoughts and feelings, and creating an emotional space within the relationship are elements of emotional empowerment that enhance couples' compatibility (27).

(3) What is the role of interpersonal emotion regulation strategies in the life of couples?

Using interpersonal emotion regulation strategies in couple relationships fosters emotional attunement, which is key to successful interpersonal emotion regulation. Attuned couples gradually achieve a deeper understanding of their spouse's emotional states and develop the ability to view interpersonal issues from their partner's perspective, engaging in emotional partnership. The strategies couples use to regulate each other's emotions play a crucial role in predicting their future emotional experiences (6).

In this context, individuals articulate their emotional states more easily and acknowledge their partner's emotions, building a foundation of trust and security. Over time, this secure attachment strengthens the marital bond and positively impacts other relationships, such as those with children, in-laws,

colleagues, and friends. Secure attachment, as a favorable outcome of effective interpersonal emotion regulation, sustains and enhances the couple's bond while enabling its growth. Individuals skilled in regulating emotions within relationships exhibit higher levels of emotional sensitivity, empathy, and the ability to nurture positive social connections. Mastering interpersonal emotion regulation is thus essential for cultivating and improving relationships, as well as for enhancing emotional and social well-being (28). This aligns with the research by Brown et al., which indicates that couples with more shared emotional experiences enjoy higher-quality relationships (1). Moreover, couples with advanced interpersonal emotion regulation skills are predicted to have more favorable parent-child relationships (29, 30).

The exploration of interpersonal emotion regulation in couples underscores the importance of incorporating these strategies into therapeutic practices. Training programs and workshops can equip couples with the necessary skills to manage emotional dynamics. Additionally, emotion-focused therapy (EFT) and constructive conflict resolution strategies can improve relationship satisfaction. Developing tools to assess emotional regulation skills enables tailored interventions to address unique challenges faced by diverse couples. Providing resources that promote empathetic communication and emotional validation empowers couples to improve their interactions. Staying updated on ongoing research in this area will help practitioners refine their approaches, fostering better emotional well-being and stronger relationships.

One limitation of the research was the inability to conduct face-to-face interviews with all participants due to the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic coinciding with the research period.

5.1. Suggestions

Future researchers, through a qualitative study, should investigate in depth the ineffective strategies of interpersonal emotion regulation among couples experiencing marital incompatibilities, emotional and interpersonal problems, and those applying for divorce. Relevant organizations, including the National Organization of Youth and Welfare, as well as respected couple therapists, should design, compile, and implement a comprehensive educational and therapeutic program for couples based on the theoretical model of the current grounded theory.

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Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: H. Z. M.: Developed the theoretical formalism; N. B.: Conducted the interviews; Z. N. N.: Supervised the project; H. Z. M. and N. B.: Contributed to the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and are responsible for questions related to the article.

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