

PART 5

Daily Relationship  
Functioning



## Regulation Processes in Close Relationships

Nickola C. Overall and Jeffrey A. Simpson

### Abstract

This chapter addresses when, how, and why self and partner regulation processes operate in close relationships. Two forms of dyadic regulation are discussed. The first explores why and how people in relationships try to change each other and the consequences that ensue. Analysis of relevant research suggests that successful relationship improvement requires the person who wants change to communicate in ways that maintain targets' felt regard and the person targeted for change to be sufficiently responsive to the partner's desires and influence attempts. The second examines how relationship partners can protect or buffer their relationship from the hostility and withdrawal that often accompany attachment insecurity. Recent research indicates that partners can help insecure individuals regulate their negative affect and behavior more effectively, resulting in more satisfying and stable relationships. The final section demonstrates how a *dyadic* perspective can be applied to other regulation processes, pushing research in new directions.

**Key Words:** dyadic regulation, coregulation, self-regulation, conflict, communication, attachment, anxiety, avoidance, rejection sensitivity, support

Matthew and Helen, who started dating a couple of years ago, care about each other and are involved in a committed romantic relationship. In the past, Matthew had been involved in some turbulent and rocky romantic relationships that ended badly. While in these relationships, Matthew often felt as if he could not really please his romantic partner or “measure up” to her standards and expectations. Helen, however, had mostly good relationship experiences with all of her previous romantic partners, always knowing that she could rely on her romantic partners for comfort, support, and advice whenever she needed it.

When they started dating, Matthew did not want to replicate his past negative relationship experiences with Helen. Nevertheless, he still worried that he might not be able to live up to Helen's goals, hopes, and expectations of either him or their relationship.

Early in their relationship, Helen sensed Matthew's insecurity and vulnerability. She noticed, for example, that he got anxious whenever she talked with other men or made anything other than completely positive comments about Matthew and their relationship together. When these “ambiguous” situations arose, Matthew would become upset and sometimes start arguments that typically resulted in hurt feelings on both sides.

Recognizing this pattern and the possible source of Matthew's vulnerability, Helen changed how she interacted with him. For example, she started to steer Matthew away from situations that might trigger his concerns and worries, like concealing any minor dissatisfaction she felt. When threatening situations could not be avoided, Helen would go out of her way to express her unconditional love for and acceptance of Matthew, she would quickly

deescalate or diffuse these situations, and she would directly reassure Matthew that she was strongly committed to their lives together. Gradually, Matthew's self and relationship worries began to subside, and he started to feel much more secure about both himself and their relationship. He no longer thought as much about whether he "measured up" as a relationship partner. And when occasional arguments would surface, he behaved in a constructive and benevolent manner, thinking about how he and Helen could best achieve their long-term plans and goals together as a couple.

Matthew and Helen's relationship, which we will revisit throughout this chapter, exemplifies an important and surprisingly understudied process that occurs in all happy and well-functioning relationships—how partners shape each other through self and partner regulation. As their relationship unfolded and grew, Helen learned how to manage (regulate) Matthew's emotions and behaviors in difficult situations, which eventually yielded many positive consequences for Matthew, for Helen, and for their relationship. And once Matthew was able to adopt a more couple-centered, long-term view of their relationship, Helen was able to achieve certain plans and goals that she might not have been able to without the help of a supportive, communal, and dedicated partner.

Other types of partner regulation are also prevalent within relationships. For example, when Helen behaves in ways that are dissatisfying to Matthew, such as spending too much time at work or with friends, not completing her share of household chores, or not communicating well when she needs support, Matthew might attempt to change or regulate Helen's behavior and attitudes. If Matthew is successful and Helen changes these behaviors, this should increase Matthew's satisfaction as well as his ability to trust that Helen is committed to the relationship. On the other hand, even if Helen tries hard to change these aspects of herself in order to maintain their relationship, she may feel hurt and disappointed that Matthew does not accept her the way she is. Over time, these feelings of rejection could restrict how supportive Helen is in situations in which Matthew feels insecure and needs reassurance.

In this chapter, we address when, how, and why self and partner regulation processes operate in close relationships, especially romantic ones. We begin by reviewing some foundational principles, ideas, and findings associated with regulation processes in close relationships, beginning with self-regulation

theories and then moving to more "dyadic" forms of regulation. While doing so, we highlight empirical studies that have investigated when and how certain regulation processes operate and what outcomes different types of regulation have for both partners and the close relationships in which they reside. Following this, we identify novel and emerging themes associated with different types of regulation processes, directing special attention to the ways couples can successfully maintain and improve their relationship and how individuals can buffer their romantic partners from personal vulnerabilities and negative life events. We conclude the chapter by proposing several promising new directions for future research on regulation processes in close relationships.

### Foundational Principles: Self-Regulation and Relationships

Research addressing why and how people regulate their own behavior has been extensive. Most models suggest that self-directed behavioral change occurs in response to perceived discrepancies between an individual's goals or self-related ideals and his or her current state (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987). Large discrepancies between self-perceptions and goals or ideals often produce affective discomfort and dissatisfaction, which in turn generates behavior designed to reduce the discrepancies. The larger the discrepancy and the more slowly it is reduced, the more intense the efforts to achieve one's ultimate goals.

Self-regulation theories recognize the importance of close others in formulating the specific standards and goals that people work toward. Failing to meet a parent's ideal standards, for example, tends to produce psychological distress and interpersonal problems (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Close others also implicitly motivate goal pursuit. For example, priming representations of close others, such as one's mother, father, or a close friend, automatically increases an individual's intention and commitment to possess attributes desired by significant others, which then promotes greater persistence and success in tasks that are valued by those primed others (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003).

Thus, people's self-regulation abilities and successes are shaped in part by relationship processes. The more supportive that romantic partners are of an individual's own personal goals, the more successful that individual tends to be at achieving those personal goals over time (Feeney, 2007; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). People also move

closer to their ideal selves when they perceive that their partners have treated them as if they already possessed desired attributes (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). And the central role that relationship partners play in self-regulation success means that individuals evaluate their partners and relationships more positively to the extent that their partners help them achieve their cherished goals (e.g., Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Overall et al., 2010).

Self-regulation processes are also pivotal to maintaining social connections with others. Leary and colleagues' sociometer model, along with considerable supporting evidence, indicates that negative affect and low self-esteem are triggered by declines in relational value, which adaptively motivate actions to increase social inclusion, such as conforming to the wishes of others or being more helpful to them (Leary, 2004). Key relationship maintenance behaviors also depend on people's ability to control (regulate) their behavior. Individuals who have greater self-regulatory strength, for instance, are able to control their negative impulses, which allows them to respond to the hurtful actions of their partners more constructively (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). As a result, they are less likely to experience the negative outcomes associated with dispositional traits typically linked with destructive reactions to relationship difficulties (see Ayduk et al., 2001).

This brief review demonstrates that self-regulation is imbedded within significant interpersonal processes. Individuals work toward personal standards and goals that are shaped and motivated in part by others, they are more successful when their interpersonal environments foster the attainment of specific goals, and their ability to maintain social connections and close relationships depends on their capacity to regulate their behavior in relationship-promoting ways. Indeed, regulation processes are fundamental to understanding relationship dynamics and are central elements of many relationship theories. We briefly mention two prominent examples here—attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; see also chapter 4) and the risk regulation model (Murray, Holmes & Collins, 2006; see also chapter 6).

According to Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), the attachment system evolved to keep vulnerable individuals (e.g., young children) in close physical proximity to their stronger and wiser caregivers (e.g., partners). The attachment system, however, also operates in adults when they feel threatened, distressed, or overly challenged (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). The attachment system is primarily

activated by threats to personal safety or security, which then trigger proximity-seeking and other behavioral actions designed to restore "felt security" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Once felt security is achieved, the attachment system becomes deactivated until the next threat occurs. Thus, the attachment system is a regulation system.

Depending on how they have been treated by prior attachment figures (e.g., parents, close friends, romantic partners), individuals develop different orientations or styles of relating to their attachment figures. People who have received inconsistent responsiveness from past attachment figures—sometimes receiving love and support, but at other times encountering anger, neglect, or rejection—tend to become anxiously attached. Anxious individuals worry about losing their partners, and as a result, they hypervigilantly monitor their partners and relationships for signs that their partners could be pulling away. As a consequence, anxiously attached individuals are chronically in an emotion-focused regulation mode, continually trying to achieve acceptance and emotional closeness with their partners.

People who have encountered persistent rejection from past attachment figures tend to become avoidantly attached. To avert the pain of further rebuffs, avoidant individuals use regulation strategies that involve the defensive suppression of attachment needs, which usually deactivate the attachment system and allow avoidant individuals to maintain a sense of independence, autonomy, and personal control. In contrast, people who have received good care and support from past attachment figures usually become securely attached. Secure individuals have learned through experience that they can count on their attachment figures to help them manage and reduce negative affect when it arises, which leads secure people to use constructive, problem-focused modes of regulation.

The risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006; see also Murray & Holmes, 2009), which borrows ideas and principles from attachment theory, describes how situations that contain higher risk of rejection from partners, such as during relationship conflict, are managed in one of two ways. People can regulate the risk of rejection in a self-protective manner by derogating and withdrawing from their partners, preemptively minimizing the pain that would arise if the partner behaved in a rejecting or hurtful manner. Alternatively, individuals can manage the risk of rejection in a connective manner by

attempting to restore or increase close emotional ties with their partners. If successful, this reduces an individual's vulnerability and promotes stronger feelings of closeness and security within the relationship. As with attachment theory, both of these regulation strategies reflect attempts to restore feelings of safety or personal control, and the degree to which individuals anticipate rejection governs the way in which feelings of insecurity are managed. People who have lower self-esteem and less confidence that their partners will accept them are much more likely to defend against expected rejection by becoming self-protective, which often manifests as hostile behavior and withdrawal from support that their partners are often willing to provide (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002).

In sum, self-regulation processes are central to how people manage and maintain their relationships, and people's relationships influence their self-regulation success. The aforementioned theories, however, consider how individuals regulate their *own* thoughts, emotions, and behavior. More recent regulation models also recognize that, *within relationships*, partners also attempt to regulate each other's thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

### Dyadic Regulation within Relationships

Relationships involve two people, so not all regulatory processes that are integral to relationship functioning involve merely the self. Consider, for example, the goals that many people have for their relationships. Most people want a close, intimate relationship that meets, and hopefully facilitates, their most important long-term goals, hopes, and aspirations. The more that people have strong intimacy goals—a standard directed toward the status of the relationship—the more they are likely to create relationship interactions that promote intimacy, such as doing more enjoyable activities together, being more supportive of one another, and disclosing more personal information to each other (e.g., Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). These efforts often represent attempts to move the *relationship* closer to some ideal, and they are often successful in that they foster greater satisfaction and better relationship maintenance across time (Sanderson & Cantor, 1997, 2001).

Although these types of relationship maintenance acts involve some level of self-regulation, such as Helen foregoing time with her friends in order to engage in enjoyable relationship activities with Matthew, they also involve attempts to influence

the partner, such as Helen trying to persuade Matthew to enthusiastically participate in enjoyable activities with her. Furthermore, no matter how much time Helen sets aside for their relationship, she cannot reach her goal if Matthew fails to invest time and effort in having these intimate moments with her. This raises a critical point. The interdependent nature of intimate relationships means that relationship-related goals and desires hinge on the *partner* thinking, feeling, and behaving in desired and consistent ways (see Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The following common situations are good examples of this basic point. Matthew wants the house to be tidier, but Helen believes that it is clean enough. Helen, on the other hand, wants to save money for house renovations, but Matthew wants to enjoy life and have fun now. Matthew desires more physical intimacy, but Helen is often not in the mood for sex. Helen wants Matthew to pay less attention to an attractive coworker, but Matthew doesn't see any harm in flirting with her on occasion. Matthew likes to go the pub on Friday nights, but Helen resents being stuck at home by herself.

Most couples confront these types of problems throughout their relationship, which often devolve into conflicts over the amount and quality of time spent together, disputes over money and dividing up domestic responsibilities, jealousy, and difficult topics such as sex, drug use, and alcohol use (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). These frequent problems highlight the fact that a strong desire for the partner to change in some significant way lies at the heart of relationship conflicts. Thus, central to an individual's efforts to resolve relationship conflicts is a desire to change the partner's attitudes and behavior in some manner, which involves *partner regulation*.

### The Causes and Consequences of Partner Regulation

The Ideal Standards Model (see Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001) applies the basic principles of self-regulation to partner regulation and specifies when individuals should be motivated to regulate their partner. According to this model, individuals possess chronically accessible mate and relationship ideal standards that are used to evaluate potential mates and current partners within established relationships. These ideal standards fall into three general categories: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources.

Across many cultures, both men and women focus on these particular dimensions when looking for long-term mates (Fletcher, 2002), and

factor analytic studies have indicated that most partner-evaluation items fall into one of these three categories (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). From an evolutionary perspective, these characteristics are associated with two principal mating criteria that are believed to enhance reproductive fitness in humans—mate investment (warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources) and good genes (attractiveness/vitality; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). These three categories also capture features centrally tied to the common problems listed above, such as intimacy, sensitivity, understanding, finances, and trustworthiness.

Similar to the self-regulation models described above, the Ideal Standards Model also postulates that the level of consistency between ideal standards and corresponding perceptions of the current partner affects evaluative judgments about the quality of the current relationship and also signals the need for self and/or partner regulation attempts. Indeed, when perceptions of the current partner and relationship more closely match an individual's ideal standards, partners and relationships tend to be evaluated more positively (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999), and individuals are less likely to dissolve their relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). When partners do not match one's ideals very closely, however, individuals are less happy in their relationships and more inclined to eventually break up.

Supporting the regulation function of ideal standards, Overall, Fletcher, and Simpson (2006) also found that the lower the consistency between an individual's ideal standards and his or her perceptions of the partner's warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, or status/resources, the more that individual desired and attempted to change the discrepant attributes in their partner. For example, if Matthew places greater importance on warmth/trustworthiness in a partner, but Helen falls short in this domain, the more Matthew will try to get Helen to become a more warm and trustworthy partner.

Overall et al. (2006) also found that, rather than improving the relationship, more strenuous partner regulation attempts were associated with *lower* relationship quality as reported by both partners. There were two reasons why greater partner regulation had this ironic effect. First, greater attempts to change the partner were associated with the partner feeling less valued and accepted. For instance, if Matthew tries to help Helen communicate more warmly and sensitively, such efforts are likely to

be noticed by Helen, and it will dawn on her that Matthew is evaluating her poorly. Second, agents of change (i.e., those who are trying to change their partners) usually believed their regulation attempts were relatively ineffective and, as a consequence, perceived their partners and relationships more negatively. If Helen tries hard to spend more quality time with Matthew, but Matthew decides to spend time at work instead, this signals to Helen that Matthew is not committed to their relationship, and she is likely to become even more dissatisfied. We explore these pathways in greater detail below.

### ***Partner Regulation and Perceived Regard***

Judgments regarding the partner's regard and acceptance play a pivotal role in the functioning of intimate relationships (Murray et al., 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Individuals who live up to their partner's ideals have higher relationship satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2001), and when intimates perceive their partner regards them positively, they trust in their partner's continued commitment, and constructively cope with relationship difficulties by trying to restore closeness (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). In contrast, individuals who believe that their partner holds a lower opinion of them experience chronic insecurities, are less satisfied, and protect themselves from expected rejection by devaluing their partners (Murray et al., 2003).

Individuals' perceptions of their partner's regard are largely shaped by how the partner behaves toward the self (cf. Cooley, 1902). When partners respond in an accommodative and forgiving fashion to poor behavior, this conveys commitment, and intimates therefore become more trusting and committed to the relationship over time (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Similarly, when partners respond to self-disclosures with more positivity and enthusiasm, this increases trust, feelings of acceptance, and a more positive orientation toward the partner (Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis et al., 2010).

When partners try to change aspects of the *self*, however, such behavior communicates dissatisfaction and lower regard. Intimates should be particularly sensitive to behavior that indicates the partner's evaluation may be waning because of the important outcomes associated with drops in regard, such as rejection and dissatisfaction. In line with this premise, Overall et al. (2006) found that receiving regulation attempts from one's partner led individuals to infer that they were not living up to their partner's

standards. Overall and Fletcher (2010) have also documented this effect longitudinally: the more individuals received regulation attempts from their partners, the more negatively regarded they felt over the following 6 months.

Illustrating how crucial it is to feel valued and regarded by one's partner, Overall and Fletcher (2010) also found that, by reducing perceived regard, receiving regulation attempts had further detrimental effects for the targeted partner. Figure 19.1 illustrates the impact regulation had on the target of regulation. The first path, Path A, depicts the links described above: when Partner A (the agent of regulation) tries to change Partner B (the target of regulation), Partner B suffers drops in perceived regard. The second path, Path B, illustrates that such drops in perceived regard undermine the targeted partner's relationship satisfaction. Specifically, consistent with prior work showing that perceiving positive regard by the partner is essential to feeling secure within relationships (e.g., Murray et al., 2006), decreases in perceived regard resulting from the partner's regulation attempts predicted lower relationship quality.

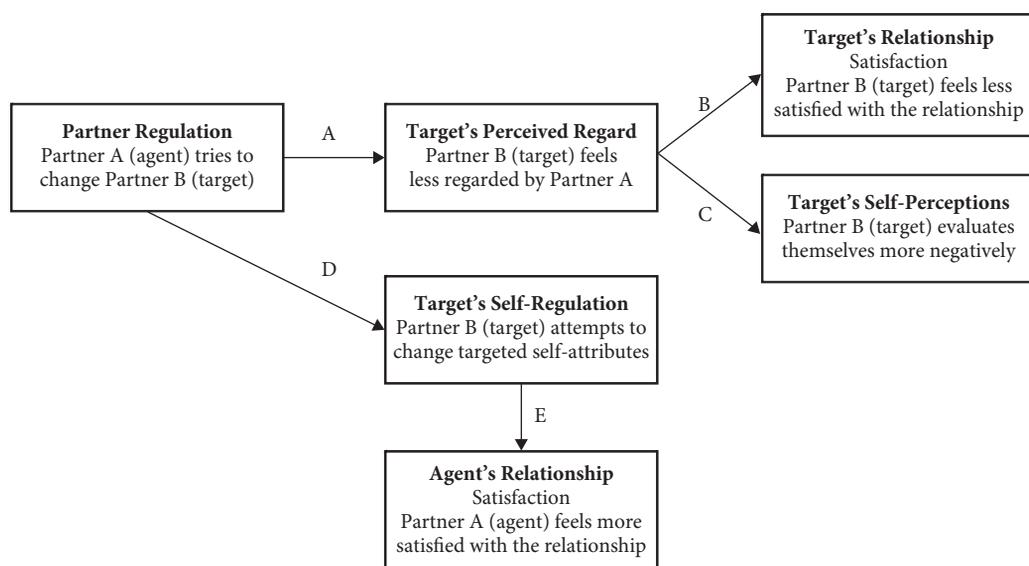
Third, as illustrated by Path C, because the partners' attempts to change targets' self-attributes reduced targets' perceived regard, receiving regulation attempts from the partner damaged targets' self-evaluations, generating more negative self-perceptions and eroding self-esteem across time. This pathway illustrates the standard reflected appraisal process proposed by symbolic interaction theory (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). That is, how

the self is responded to during social interactions reflects how others view and appraise the self (Path A, Figure 19.1). These reflected appraisals then shape the self-concept as individuals incorporate feedback regarding others' appraisals into their own self-perceptions (Path C, Figure 19.1).

In sum, partner regulation attempts convey diagnostic feedback that an individual is being evaluated negatively by the partner, undermining his or her felt security and relationship satisfaction. Such negative feedback also has corrosive effects on the way that individuals evaluate their *own* qualities and self-worth. So, the more that Matthew tries to enhance Helen's ability to communicate more warmly and sensitively, the more Helen: (1) realizes that Matthew is likely to be dissatisfied with her amount of warmth and sensitivity (Figure 19.1, Path A), (2) becomes less satisfied with the relationship (Path B), and (3) begins to evaluate herself more negatively (Path C). We discuss the other paths in Figure 19.1 next.

### *Partner Regulation versus Self-Regulation*

So far, the picture of partner regulation looks pretty grim, despite the fact that it is often intended to repair dissatisfaction and improve relationships. Unlike self-regulation attempts, the harm to targeted partners suggests that partner regulation attempts are detrimental to relationships. Moreover, many relationship therapies suggest that the route to successful relationship improvement typically involves partner acceptance (e.g., Christensen et al., 2004),



**Figure 19.1** Consequences of partner regulation attempts for the agent (Partner A) and target (Partner A) of regulation.

refraining from partner blaming, and focusing on aspects of the self that might be contributing to relationship difficulties (e.g., Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994). As discussed earlier, we know that self-regulation can be good for relationships, partly because individuals need to control their desires to hurt and retaliate against their partners when they feel aggrieved or dissatisfied. Thus, a more constructive approach might be to refrain from partner regulation attempts and attempt to change oneself instead.

Exploring this possibility, Hira and Overall (2011) contrasted partner-focused versus self-focused attempts to improve relationships. Consistent with the clinical evidence, blaming and regulating the partner was associated with less success in producing desired relationship changes and lower relationship quality. Successful change of self-attributes, in contrast, was associated with greater improvement of targeted problems in the relationship. However, successful self-change did not generate more relationship satisfaction.

Why doesn't successful self-change that improves relationship problems lead to more favorable evaluations of relationship quality? Returning to the interdependence that exists between relationship partners, the most likely explanation is that improving relationship problems requires change on the part of *both* partners. Any improvement the individual makes will not resolve dissatisfaction if his or her partner's contribution to the problem is not also modified. Consistent with this reasoning, Hira and Overall (2011) also found that when *partners* were perceived to be trying to change themselves and *partners* were more successful in their own self-regulation attempts, individuals reported greater relationship improvement *and* they also evaluated the relationship more positively.

This pattern highlights an important distinction in the outcomes of partner regulation for the target versus the agent of regulation. As documented above and in Figure 19.1, partner regulation has costs for the target in terms of declines in felt regard (Path A), evaluations of relationship quality (Path B), and lowered self-esteem (Path C). In contrast, for the person who wants change (the agent), feelings of discontent are best alleviated by the targeted partner successfully making at least some of the changes desired by the agent. Furthermore, successful partner regulation can have this important payoff if targeted partners try to change targeted self-attributes. This pathway is shown by Paths D and E in Figure 19.1. The studies reviewed above

that have documented the damaging effects of regulation on targeted partners (Paths A, B, and C) have also found that targets of regulation do typically directly respond to their partner's regulation attempts by trying to change targeted attributes (Overall et al., 2006; Overall & Fletcher, 2010). For example, the more that Matthew tries to change Helen's warmth and sensitivity, the more she will try to be warmer and more sensitive (see Path D), even though she is also feeling less well regarded by Matthew during the process.

Moreover, as depicted by Path E in Figure 19.1, when partner regulation efforts are successful—when the target changes or at least tries valiantly to change—agents evaluate both their partners and their relationships more positively (Hira & Overall, 2011; Overall et al., 2006). Helen's efforts to be warmer and more sensitive not only improve the relationship but also signal to Matthew that Helen is invested in the relationship and is trying to be responsive to Matthew's needs (Reis et al., 2004). Thus, Figure 19.1 highlights that partner regulation has different outcomes for the agent of regulation versus the target of regulation. For targets, partner regulation communicates lower regard to the target of change (Path A) and undermines satisfaction and self-esteem (Path B & C), but nevertheless motivates targets to alter targeted attributes (Path D). For agents, the target's responsiveness to regulation (i.e., target's attempts to change targeted characteristics) creates desired improvements and conveys commitment and higher regard to the agent of change, leading to greater relationship satisfaction for the agent of regulation (Path E).

In summary, relationship partners often want and try to change each other. Solely focusing on self-regulation and partner acceptance not only may be a tall order but also may result in heightened dissatisfaction across time. Still, frequent attempts at partner regulation pose a conundrum. Matthew's desired relationship improvements can only be achieved if Helen cooperates and changes her problematic attributes, yet this carries costs for Helen in terms of hurt feelings and lower self-esteem. The key to success, therefore, most likely involves the way in which partner regulation attempts are conducted.

### ***Regulation Strategies and Regulation Success***

How individuals attempt to regulate their partners should also provide diagnostic information to partners who are the targets of change. Receiving

negative influence strategies and tactics from one's partner, such as criticism, punishment, or threats, clearly conveys a partner's contempt and disregard for oneself. Indeed, Overall and Fletcher (2010) found that the more partners used hostile and critical regulation strategies, the more targeted intimates experienced drops in perceived regard and evaluated their relationships more negatively. In contrast, more positive regulation strategies, such as expressing affection and validation during regulation attempts, offset some of the negative effects of partner regulation by communicating care and respect. For example, receiving positive regulation tactics, such as reasoning and expressions of love, predicted more positive inferences of the partner's regard across time. Thus, cushioning regulatory feedback with positivity and affection appears to soften the typically damaging effects of partner regulation.

The use of more positive influence strategies not only may convey greater regard to targeted partners but also may motivate targeted partners to try harder to change problematic attributes. For example, Matthew's nagging and constant demands for change are unlikely to motivate Helen to listen attentively or strive to become warmer and more sensitive. Overall and Fletcher (2010) found evidence that targets were generally more resistant to change when their partners used more negative regulation strategies, but they were more receptive and responded with greater efforts to change when their partners enacted more positive influence strategies and tactics.

This pattern of findings fits well with most of the research on couple communication during conflicts. Engaging in hostile, critical, or demanding conflict behavior typically leads to lower relationship satisfaction and a higher probability of divorce, whereas constructive problem solving, affection, and humor sustain satisfaction (see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). The destructive effects of critical and hostile communication might primarily arise because of the impact that these negative behaviors have on the targeted partner. For example, blaming and demanding communications from the person who wants change often elicits defensive withdrawal, and this demand-withdraw pattern forecasts further declines in relationship satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). Negative strategies, such as guilt induction, pressures for change, and coercive derogation, have also been linked with greater hostility, defensiveness, and resistance on the

part of the targeted partner (Gottman, 1998; Lewis & Rook, 1999; Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002).

Similar to the effects of partner regulation, however, the impact of negative communication might differ depending on whether a person is the target (who wants to be valued) or the agent of regulation (who desires partner change). Some studies, for example, have found that criticizing, blaming, and pressuring for change during conflict predict relative *increases* in relationship satisfaction across time (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Similarly, a few studies have documented that positive forms of communication, such as agreement and humor, predict a greater probability of divorce or more negative long-term relationship evaluations (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

One explanation for these results rests on partner regulation success. Specifically, directly confronting a problem and engaging in conflict can lead to more success in resolving the problem because doing so motivates targeted partners to bring about the desired change (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995). Consistent with this proposition, the majority of negative behaviors that are linked with positive longitudinal relationship outcomes are active, direct, and partner focused, such as criticism or blame, whereas most of the positive behaviors that are associated with poorer relationship outcomes tend to be "soft" and minimize overt conflict through the use of humor, validation, or affection.

To test these ideas, Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009) categorized communication strategies according to their valence (positive or negative) and their directness (direct or indirect), resulting in four global types of strategies. These are shown in Table 19.1. Direct strategies are explicit, overt, and partner focused. *Positive-direct* tactics include providing rational reasons for desired change, weighing the pros and cons of behavior, and offering possible solutions. *Negative-direct* tactics include demanding change and derogating or threatening the partner. Both positive and negative direct tactics involve the explicit expression of discontent, and they directly impress upon the target the need for change. In the short-term, this is likely to produce defensiveness and diminished felt regard in the targeted partner. However, by clearly communicating the nature and importance of the problem, direct tactics might also motivate targets to make stronger and more persistent efforts to achieve the desired change.

**Table 19.1 Consequences of Different Regulation Strategies for Targets and Agents of Regulation**

Regulation Strategies	Associated Tactics	Impact on Target of Regulation	Outcome for Agent of Regulation
<b>Direct Strategies</b>			
Positive direct	Outlining the causes and consequences of the problem, exploring potential alternatives, weighing pros and cons, and facilitating constructive discussions to generate solutions	Clearly expresses desire for change and dissatisfaction but provides direct course of action so that targets are more likely to change. Positive approach helps to protect targets' feelings of regard and satisfaction.	Target change leads to greater perceived improvement and relationship satisfaction of agent. Positivity maintains closeness and facilitates mutual responsiveness.
Negative direct	Directly criticizing, blaming, or invalidating the partner, using threats, expressing anger and irritation, demanding or commanding change, or adopting a domineering and non-negotiable stance	Clearly conveys problem severity and need for change so targets are more likely to change. Harsh negativity elicits defensiveness and reduces perceived regard so that targets are likely to suffer dissatisfaction even if change is produced.	Target change leads to greater perceived improvement and relationship satisfaction of agent. Negative target reactions undermine closeness and might limit positive impact of target change.
<b>Indirect Strategies</b>			
Positive indirect	Softening regulation by using charm, humor and affection, minimizing the problem, focusing on positive aspects of the partner/relationship, conveying optimism for improvement, and holding back negative reactions	Reduces conflict and communicates regard and thus maintains targets' relationship satisfaction. Downplays the severity of the problem so that targets do not understand the need for change and thus alter very little.	Lack of target change conveys low responsiveness and regard. Agent feels unappreciated and unvalued, reducing closeness and damaging relationship satisfaction.
Negative indirect	Attempts to induce guilt by focusing on past transgressions or appealing to targets' obligations, love, or concern; using emotional expressions of hurt and portraying the self as a powerless victim to induce sympathy	Do not clearly outline specific changes or how change can be made so that targets are less likely to change in desired ways. Negative and manipulative tone likely to create resistance and resentment, undermining regard and satisfaction.	Lack of target change and responsiveness exacerbates negative feelings and dissatisfaction. Combination of low change and high negativity might create cycle of mutual unresponsiveness.

Indirect strategies, by comparison, involve passive or covert ways of resolving issues and bringing about desired change. *Positive-indirect* tactics include attempts to soften conflict and convey positive regard by minimizing the problem or focusing on more salubrious partner features. In the short term, this type of warm, accommodating behavior should reduce conflict and communicate regard. However, these tactics downplay the severity of the problem and, thus, might do little to spur partner change. *Negative-indirect* tactics include appealing to the partner's love or relationship obligations and

sometimes portraying the self as a "powerless victim." These tactics are likely to be ineffective because they put the responsibility for change on the partner, but similar to positive-indirect tactics, they do not specify how improvements could be made.

Overall et al. (2009) assessed the success of these four general regulation strategies by measuring them as couples discussed aspects of each other that they wanted to change. Each couple was then tracked to assess whether targeted partner attributes actually changed during the following year. When agents used more negative-direct *or* positive-direct

regulation strategies during their discussions, both partners immediately perceived the discussions as being relatively ineffective at motivating behavior change. Direct partner regulation attempts makes it abundantly clear to the target that the partner's regard has diminished, which should provoke resistance to change by the target. However, *both* positive and negative direct strategies predicted *greater* change in targeted features across the subsequent year. In other words, although a direct approach elicits negative affect and feelings of lower regard, because direct strategies clearly communicate the nature and severity of the problem, they are more successful at motivating the target to change the problematic behavior. And, the more targets changed, the more agents reported a reduction in problem severity and, in turn, became more satisfied with their relationship.

In contrast, although the use of positive-indirect strategies was associated with initial perceptions of success and less distress during the discussions, there was no connection between positive-indirect strategies and behavior change across time. A soft, tactful approach may protect felt regard in the short term, but such tactics lessen the salience and visibility of the problem. This, in turn, may make the targeted partner less aware of the extent of the problem, leaving the target oblivious to the partner's dissatisfaction (also see Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995). In short, a soft approach communicates that improvement may be unnecessary and, therefore, fails to motivate significant change in targeted traits or behaviors.

This leads us back to a critical point we have already made. The costs and benefits of partner regulation (and associated regulation strategies) differ for the partner who wants change versus the partner who is the target of change. We summarize these different outcomes in Table 19.1. For example, a negative direct approach is damaging for the targets of regulation but can have benefits for agents of regulation. The harshness of these types of direct tactics elicits defensiveness and undermines targets' perceived regard, but by conveying the nature and severity of the problem, targets are more likely to change, resulting in desired improvement and thus satisfaction for agents. In contrast, a soft, positive-indirect regulation approach benefits the target but has costs for agents. Targets do not fully understand the need to change, still feel regarded by their partner, and therefore do not alter their behavior. However, the partner who really wants change (the agent of change) is likely to become increasingly

dissatisfied as their efforts to protect the feelings of their partner mean little improvement is made.

Assessing the consequences of positive-indirect behavior for the agent in daily social interactions, Overall, Sibley, and Travaglia (2010) found that positive-indirect strategies were less noticed by targeted partners and had little impact on the problem, with targets failing to modify their negative behaviors. This lack of recognition and reciprocation left agents feeling less valued and less close to their partners. It takes considerable effort and motivation to channel regulation communications into a palatable form for targets to digest. It is not surprising, therefore, that when these efforts go unrecognized or unacknowledged, agents feel particularly undervalued and disconnected. At its worse, positive-indirect attempts that are ignored may foster disappointment and resentment among agents, eroding their satisfaction and commitment, especially if agents continue to confront partner problems that never improve.

Assessing the different outcomes for agents and targets of regulation (see Table 19.1) offers valuable direction regarding the types of resolution strategies that are likely to be most beneficial for relationships. As indicated above, agent benefits are maximized when direct strategies are employed because this spurs target change. In contrast, target benefits occur most when positive strategies are used because positive communications should signal the partner's care, regard, and responsiveness. Thus, the increases in problem resolution arising from direct regulation strategies should be best accomplished when using tactics that also communicate care and regard, such as directly discussing problems and suggesting solutions. Positive-direct strategies are likely to be the optimal approach for improving relationships because they protect the satisfaction of both agents and targets by enhancing understanding of the problem and motivating target change while also reassuring targeted partners they are valued and cared for.

This pattern, and the results across all of the studies presented above, highlights that successful partner regulation and associated relationship improvement require balancing the needs of *both* partners. Agents of regulation must communicate in ways that maintain targets' felt regard, and targets must be sufficiently responsive to agents' regulation desires and constructive influence attempts. The right balance, however, is likely to shift according to several contextual factors, especially the type and severity of the specific problem with which a couple is dealing. When faced with more serious problems,

it becomes more important to resolve issues and employ direct communication strategies, even if that means expressing criticism and hostility. In contrast, direct and negative communication strategies may be particularly damaging when minor difficulties do not warrant a tough, no-holds-barred approach. Supporting this conjecture, McNulty and Russell (2010) found that blaming, commanding, and rejecting the partner during problem-solving discussions predicted more stable and satisfying relationships for couples who were dealing with more serious problems. In contrast, intimates who engaged in more blame and criticism, but were not threatened by severe issues, suffered growing problems and declines in satisfaction across time. The change produced by a direct and negative approach, therefore, outweighs the costs of reduced regard only when something really needs to be changed.

Likewise, a positive communication approach should be beneficial mainly when partners cease to behave negatively and problems are resolved. In fact, McNulty, O'Mara, and Karney (2004) found that more forgiving explanations for negative partner behavior led to increases in satisfaction, but only when couples were dealing with relatively minor problems. When couples were facing severe problems, tolerant attributions predicted greater declines in satisfaction precisely because problems continued to worsen across time. As before, soft positive approaches that do not threaten the target's self-regard and relationship evaluations, but only tangentially address the problem, lead to relationship deterioration if it is vital that relationship problems are eventually resolved. When problems are only minor, however, more positive, indirect approaches may keep relationships buoyant.

In summary, couples need to adjust their regulation strategies to the demands of their problems. Partners who consistently adopt a direct and negative regulation strategy by default are likely to cause irreparable damage to their relationships, especially when direct and heated communication is disproportionate to the severity of the relationship problem. Conversely, a consistently soft and positive approach is likely to become damaging when important issues remain unaddressed and unresolved, and relationship hurdles are never surmounted. Regardless of whether problems are severe or only minor, a positive, direct approach seems to offer the optimal balance (see Table 19.1). Direct communication provides the understanding and incentive necessary for targets to alter their problem-inducing attitudes and behaviors. Successful change by the

target, in turn, should improve conditions within the relationships by conveying high levels of commitment and responsiveness, thereby boosting the satisfaction of the partner who wanted the change. And, by conveying care and regard, positive-direct communication should achieve all this without damaging the targeted partner's felt security and self-worth.

### **Regulating Insecurity: Buffering Relationships from Rejection Sensitivity**

When introducing the important role that regulation plays in relationship processes, we noted two influential theoretical frameworks that present prototypical strategies for regulating feelings of security in relationships: attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; see also chapter 4) and the risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006; Murray & Holmes, 2009; see also chapter 6). Both theories contend that threatening events, especially threatening relationship interactions, make concerns about rejection salient in most people. Relationships are critical potential sources of threat because people's most important hopes, desires, and goals frequently depend on long-term cooperation from their partners (Kelley et al., 2003). The more committed Matthew is to his relationship, the more his happiness hinges on Helen's continued investment. And the more relationship threats that Matthew encounters, the more he is vulnerable to being hurt by Helen. Matthew's dependence, therefore, places him in the precarious position of having to trust and depend on Helen to be responsive to his most important needs and desires over time. It is precisely in these situations that the risk of rejection is at its peak. The way in which individuals manage risk depends in part on the outcomes they have typically experienced in dependence-based interactions in their past, which are captured by individual differences in attachment security.

Attachment theory offers a detailed account of how developmental histories shape how people react to dependence and rejection risk within close relationships. A history of being able to consistently rely on caregivers to be available and responsive in times of need fosters a secure attachment orientation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973). Secure individuals trust that close others will respond with love and support, and consequently, they confidently approach challenging interactions with current relationship partners by harboring positive expectations and pro-relationship motivations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Secure

individuals, for example, seek intimacy and support when they are distressed (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), and they respond to relationship conflicts in a more constructive, benevolent, and relationship-promotive manner (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

When attachment figures have responded inconsistently to bids or requests for love, comfort, and support, this produces an anxious attachment orientation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Anxiously attached individuals fear that, regardless of their attempts to secure love and intimacy, their partners may reject or abandon them. As a result, they become hyper-vigilant about the availability and supportiveness of their partners, are sensitive to rejection, and try to cling to and control their partners in order to maintain some amount of closeness and connection. Not surprisingly, the concerns associated with attachment anxiety are intensified in threatening situations that involve high risk of rejection. Greater attachment anxiety, for example, is associated with greater distress, anger, and hurt feelings during relationship conflicts (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Simpson et al., 1996) and when partners fail to provide needed support (e.g., Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999).

When attachment figures consistently respond to dependence and comfort seeking with cold rejection, individuals develop an avoidant attachment orientation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Avoidant individuals learn that they cannot trust and depend on others, which leads them to defensively suppress their attachment needs, avoid closeness and intimacy, and become rigidly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Avoidant intimates escape dependence by refusing to seek or provide support (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992) and by withdrawing from interactions that could increase intimacy (Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002; Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996). Attachment avoidance also produces defensive coldness and withdrawal, both during relationship conflicts and when partners need comfort or support (e.g., Simpson et al., 1996; Rholes et al., 1999). In what follows, we concentrate on attachment anxiety to illustrate dyadic regulation processes. We consider how these processes might play out in relation to attachment avoidance later in the chapter.

### ***Attachment Anxiety and Regulation within Relationships***

Most of the prior research that has focused on how attachment orientations affect relationship

behavior has adopted an individual-centered perspective. That is, most past research has focused on how a person's attachment orientation influences his or her own reactions in relationship-threatening situations (Simpson & Tran, 2011). With respect to regulating negative emotions, for example, anxiously attached individuals tend to use emotion-focused coping strategies, vigilantly focusing on, ruminating about, and amplifying the source, severity, or chronicity of their distress (see Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 2004). This mode of coping is ineffective at containing negativity and adjusting adaptively to most relationship challenges. Consequently, highly anxious individuals respond to stressful events with more pronounced and prolonged distress (Feeney & Kirkpatrick, 1996; Rholes et al., 1999), they maximize the severity of relationship events by attributing mal intent and rejection to their partners (e.g., Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006), and they then lash out with punishing and sometimes spiteful anger and hostility (e.g., Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Simpson et al., 1996).

These reactions can take a tremendous toll on relationships, partly because of the counter-reactions elicited in their partners. As described earlier, negative and hostile conflict strategies often elicit reciprocated negativity and undermine the partner's felt regard. Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, and Khouri (1998), for example, found that women who expected and were more sensitive to rejection (i.e., highly anxious women) were more likely to experience anger and display hostility during conflict interactions, which in turn produced heightened anger in their romantic partners. Downey and colleagues (1998) also found that the partners of rejection-sensitive women reported more negative relationship evaluations on days following greater conflicts. Thus, anxious individuals' destructive regulation strategies lead to precisely what they fear the most—erosion of their partners' relationship satisfaction and commitment.

Once again, this illustrates that, in order to fully understand the impact of one partner's attachment orientation or regulation strategies, one has to assess dyadic processes, including the *other partner's* reactions. When partners respond negatively to the destructive reactions of insecure individuals, this amplifies the damage and can destabilize the relationship even further. When individuals are able to compensate for their partner's insecurities by resisting retaliation and attempting to soothe their partners, however, this might alleviate or counteract

the negative effects of attachment anxiety. This possibility involves the regulation efforts enacted by the *partners* of insecure individuals; that is, how partners regulate their own emotions and behavior in response to rejection-sensitive hostility, and how they try to regulate the insecurities, negative emotions, and caustic behaviors of their anxiously attached partners.

### ***Accommodation as Dyadic Regulation***

When partners behave with hurt and negativity, particularly during conflict or other relationship-threatening interactions, the typical “gut response” is to protect oneself by firing criticism and hurt back at the partner or by withdrawing from the situation and relationship. A more constructive response is to voice concerns directly in a balanced manner, try to resolve the problem as constructively as possible, and be lenient and forgiving of the partner’s heat-of-the-moment reactions. Thus, individuals are faced with a dilemma—do they reduce vulnerability by attacking their partner and distancing themselves from the relationship, or do they advance the longer term motive of protecting and perhaps solidifying the relationship (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003)?

When partners are able to transform their initial gut-level, self-protective impulses to derogate, counter-attack, or withdraw from their partner into a more controlled effort to resolve the situation in a calm, forgiving, and supportive manner, known as *accommodation*, this is very good for relationships (Rusbult et al., 1991). Accommodation predicts increases in relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998), partly because it builds trust and commitment (Wieselquist et al., 1999) and eases difficult interactions by maintaining feelings of acceptance and intimacy (Overall & Sibley, 2008).

Accommodation, however, is difficult to do. It requires deliberate, self-regulated effort to transform the desire for revenge into promoting what is best for one’s partner and/or the relationship. Accordingly, people who have greater self-control and the associated ability to override self-protection concerns are more likely to display greater accommodation (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Partners who are more committed, and therefore are more motivated to overcome anger to repair their relationships, also display higher levels of accommodation, in part because more committed partners try harder to adopt their partner’s perspective on disagreements (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998).

Accommodation clearly involves self-regulation, but it also entails efforts to regulate the partner’s emotions, thoughts, and behavior. Easing conflict and restoring connection involve reducing the partner’s anger and negative affect en route to trying to soothe the partner. Gottman (1994), for example, highlights the important role of deescalating conflict by trying to repair the hurt and distance that arises during many conflicts. Accommodation works only if these repair attempts are successful in alleviating the partner’s initial negativity.

This highlights the risk of accommodation and repair efforts: The desired outcome, which includes alleviating distress and establishing a closer connection with the partner, depends heavily on how the partner responds. Individuals who have little confidence that their partner will be responsive to repair efforts, similar to those who are high in attachment anxiety, tend to react with more negative emotions and often fail to accommodate (Overall & Sibley, 2009; Simpson et al., 1996). People high in attachment anxiety might also be harder to soothe and might be more rejecting of their partner’s repair attempts, making it particularly difficult for their partners to calm them. On the other hand, highly committed and secure individuals might be able to compensate and help their insecure partners more effectively by regulating their partner’s negative affect and behavior during relationship-threatening interactions. We now turn to this set of issues.

### ***Regulating Insecurity within Conflict Interactions***

Two recent studies adopting a dyadic regulation perspective demonstrate the essential role of the *partner* in regulating the destructive reactions associated with relationship insecurities. Tran and Simpson (2009) videotaped married couples discussing habits or characteristics that they wanted to change in each other. This is a threatening situation, even for those who are secure about their partner’s love and acceptance. To test whether highly committed individuals exhibited greater accommodation and, in turn, produced more positive affect and behavior in their partners, Tran and Simpson (2009) gathered measures of each partner’s emotional reactions and objectively coded his or her accommodation behaviors. They also measured both partners’ level of commitment and attachment anxiety, and tested whether the partners of more anxiously attached intimates were able to circumvent the negativity usually displayed by highly anxious individuals.

Regardless of how committed they were, individuals who scored high in attachment anxiety experienced more negative affect and displayed more destructive behaviors during the videotaped discussions. Thus, feeling satisfied and committed within a relationship does little to override chronic expectations of rejection, at least in contexts that pose the threat of rejection, such as being asked to make an important personal change by one's partner. The partners' reactions, however, depended on their level of commitment. When less committed, the partners of individuals who scored higher in attachment anxiety were also more likely to experience greater negative emotions and to display less accommodation. However, when the partners of anxiously attached persons were highly committed to the relationship, highly anxious individuals felt less rejected and, in turn, displayed greater accommodation. Being motivated to maintain their relationships, these individuals were able to overcome their partners' defensive reactions and counteract their typical negativity.

An examination of dyadic effects—how one partner's reactions affected the other partner—revealed that these repair attempts worked. Anxious intimates whose *partners* reported strong commitment experienced greater feelings of acceptance and positivity during their discussions at levels comparable to secure intimates (see Simpson & Tran, 2011). And, across the entire sample, greater accommodation was an effective way to regulate or repair partner's feelings of rejection in that greater accommodative behavior by wives resulted in more positive emotions among their husbands, and vice versa. These findings illustrate that when partners are more committed and work to sustain the relationship, they can allay the rejection concerns and defensive reactions of their insecurely attached partners in ways that anxious individuals cannot manage by themselves. In doing so, partners guard the relationship from the undermining effects of insecurity, building more trust and faith, and promoting more stable relationships.

A recent study by Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, and Collins (2011) provides further evidence of these long-term buffering effects. In their study, Salvatore et al. (2011) used data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005) to assess how well couples recovered from conflict. To maintain relationships and fulfill other dyadic tasks and goals, such as reestablishing intimacy, supporting one another, and parenting, couples need to effectively

disengage and move on from conflict. Indeed, successful management of relationship problems is likely to involve being able to heatedly discuss disagreements, productively switch to other important topics or interactions (particularly if no resolution has been made), and then return to disagreements at more suitable times, perhaps with a cooler and more balanced frame of mind. In contrast, when couples cannot move beyond the hurt and anger, conflict can spill over into daily interactions and erode relationship quality (Gottman & Levenson, 1999).

To test these ideas, Salvatore et al. (2011) analyzed videotaped discussions of couples' most major unresolved relationship problem. One partner in each couple had been studied since birth, so Salvatore and her colleagues also had childhood attachment scores (i.e., the Strange Situation) for those partners. Immediately following the conflict discussion, each couple engaged in a 5-minute "cool-down" task during which they were asked to discuss aspects of their relationship on which they agreed the most. The behaviors displayed during the cool-down task reflected the degree to which each partner was able to quickly "recover" from the preceding conflict discussion. Low conflict recovery involved perseverating on the conflict, sabotaging potentially positive exchanges with the partner, being difficult, or refusing to interact with the partner. High conflict recovery, in contrast, was evident when partners focused on positive aspects of their relationship and were responsive to each other's positivity and relationship repair efforts.

More insecurely attached participants (i.e., those who were rated as being insecurely attached in the Strange Situation with their mothers when they were 12 to 18 months old) were less able to confine their negative feelings and concerns to the conflict discussion and tended to "reengage" in the conflict when asked to discuss positive features of their relationship. Like all relationship dynamics we have discussed so far, effective conflict recovery requires both partners. Thus, the partners of more insecure individuals also exhibited poorer conflict recovery. This pattern of results highlights how people who are sensitive to rejection and do not trust in their partner's responsiveness (i.e., insecurely attached people) may create cycles of negativity that then permeate future relationship interactions.

If, however, the partners of insecure individuals can exit this negative cycle and compensate for the perseveration associated with insecurity, this might shield couples from the hurtful aftershocks. Highlighting that recovery depends on the partner,

an individual's ability to cool down and disengage from the conflict discussion was *not* associated with their relationship emotions and satisfaction. Instead, people felt more positive about their relationships to the extent that their *partners* showed better conflict recovery. In addition, the partner's degree of conflict recovery played a critical role in buffering the relationship from attachment insecurity. Participants who had insecure attachment histories but had partners who were better at recovering from conflict were more likely to still be together 2 years later. In contrast, insecure individuals involved with partners who could not move beyond conflict were less likely to remain together.

In summary, these partner-buffering studies advance our understanding of the important role that dyadic regulation plays in affecting long-term relationship outcomes, particularly in relationships that face the dangers of attachment insecurity. Relationship conflict is particularly threatening to people who are sensitive to possible rejection. However, it is also an important "diagnostic situation" because it affords partners the opportunity to display trustworthiness, reliance, and care by reacting with greater accommodation during conflicts and recovering more quickly from them (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Simpson, 2007). By being responsive and demonstrating restraint, individuals can regulate and minimize their partner's negative emotions and behavior, preventing their insecurities and hostility from spreading through the relationship. Across the course of a relationship, this should help insecure intimates develop a stronger sense of trust and, perhaps, more secure beliefs and expectations (Simpson, 2007).

### ***Regulating Insecurity across Daily Life***

Compensatory efforts to regulate partner's insecurity should also be important in other diagnostic situations, such as when insecure targets need support. When partners are more supportive, more anxiously attached people tend to be happier and more optimistic about the future of their relationships (Campbell et al., 2005; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001). Individuals might also attempt to boost their partner's security by adopting a particularly positive view of them and/or the relationship on a daily basis. People who are less secure about their partner's acceptance and regard, for example, should and do experience improved self-esteem, more positive emotions, and better relationship evaluations on days when they receive more positive and responsive reactions from close

others (Campbell et al., 2005; Cikara & Girgus, 2010). This is probably the case because their partners make special efforts to reassure them that they are truly loved and cared about.

Lemay and Dudley (2011) propose that people learn quickly about their partner's insecurities because of the strong affective and behavioral reactivity to threat that is openly displayed by many highly anxious and low-self-esteem partners. People also learn the difficulties that these insecurities can generate in relationships, leading them to devise preemptive strategies to avoid upsetting their insecure partners. In addition to appeasing rejection-sensitive hostility during threatening situations, individuals might also accomplish this goal by displaying exaggerated expressions of affection and regard and concealing negative feelings or dissatisfaction.

Lemay and Dudley (2011) tested these predictions by asking friends to privately rate each other's level of security (i.e., self-esteem and attachment anxiety) and to evaluate each other, including how much they valued their friend and were committed to their relationship. Some participants were then unexpectedly asked to provide their evaluations again, but this time their friends would see the information. When participants perceived that their friend was relatively insecure, they concealed any negative evaluations from their friend by providing more positive ratings of them than they first provided. When participants rated their friends as relatively secure, there were very few differences between their private and public responses.

In a follow-up diary study with romantic partners, Lemay and Dudley (2011) also confirmed that exaggerated positive sentiments can help insecure partners feel more valued. On days when intimates perceived that their partners felt more insecure (e.g., feeling negatively regarded or worried about the relationship), participants were more worried about upsetting their partners, more cautious about how they treated their partners, and more likely to exaggerate positive and conceal negative sentiments of their partners. This "affective exaggeration" in turn predicted *decreases* in their partner's insecurity on subsequent days.

These findings provide good evidence that people try to avoid triggering their partner's insecure defenses by cautiously camouflaging discontent and accentuating how much they care about their partner. And this regulation strategy works; insecure intimates do feel more valued and regarded. This strategy is not without its dangers, however. Lemay and Clark (2008) also found that insecure

people are more likely to perceive that significant others sometimes deliver inauthentic and exaggerated expressions of regard, in part because of their own reassurance seeking. Furthermore, doubting the authenticity of expressed regard from partners can result in increased feelings of rejection and associated destructive reactions, such as partner derogation. Thus, if not carried out with care, insecure individuals may detect their partners' overcompensation, which can damage their feelings of security in the relationship.

Constantly censoring complaints, exaggerating affection, and trying not to hurt overly sensitive partners—that is, walking on eggshells—is likely to have costs for people involved with insecure partners. Continual reassurance and persistent efforts to bolster an insecure partner's regard takes a great deal of time, effort, and energy, and often mean that one's *own* needs are put on the back burner. For example, loyally holding off criticism and softening requests for change often fail to improve dissatisfaction by not providing the opportunity for partners to be responsive and bring about desired changes. The tough job of keeping insecure intimates propped up, therefore, is likely to erode satisfaction over time. Indeed, Lemay and Dudley (2011) found that the more partners reported engaging in exaggerated affection, the less positively they viewed their relationship.

In summary, the ultimate outcome of dyadic regulation processes ought to differ according to the agent (the person trying to bolster the security of their partner) and the target of regulation (the insecure person who is getting extra love and attention). This balance might become more favorable over time if regulation of the partner's insecurity works to improve his or her level of trust and self-esteem. In most good relationships, this is likely to be a two-way street, with both partners working hard to avoid hurt feelings and reassure feelings of value and acceptance. But if this strategy is routinely enacted by one partner in response to the hypersensitivities of the other partner, this pattern may jeopardize commitment, particularly if regulating a partner's insecurity doesn't pay off. More research needs to identify exactly how these dyadic regulation processes differentially influence each partner and, in turn, shape relationships over time, including whether or not certain regulation attempts actually forge greater relationship security.

### Emerging Themes and Future Directions

As we have seen, adopting a *dyadic* perspective on regulation processes requires mapping the

unique effects of regulation attempts with respect to *each relationship partner*. The research we have reviewed in this chapter highlights different ways in which dyadic regulation can and does have an impact on relationship functioning. Given the interdependent nature of relationships, the ultimate outcome of regulation attempts often rests on the targeted partner, including how accepted and valued the targeted partner feels in response to influence attempts; the extent to which the targeted partner recognizes, accepts, and eventually changes problematic behaviors; and how these outcomes in turn influence how the targeted partner evaluates the agent (his or her partner) who desires change. As we have also seen, however, the impact of different types of regulation strategies critically depends on whether a partner is the agent of change or the target of change. Regulation attempts that carry costs for targets may benefit the agents of regulation by producing actual change, whereas soft, indirect regulation attempts that “protect” targets may be costly for agents by failing to motivate desired improvements in targets. Similarly, regulating insecure targets' destructive reactions to conflict can bolster their security, but it might also have costs for agents if they must continually put their partner's needs before their own. Hence, to understand how and why certain behaviors shape relationships as they do, one needs to assess and model how the responses of *each partner* jointly influence the other. This requires dyadic research designs, measuring both dyad members' regulation behavior, and measuring the ensuing consequences that behavior has on both dyad members.

We have also shown how a dyadic regulation approach can inform well-established relationship processes and push relationship research in new directions. By assessing the different outcomes for targets versus agents of regulation, for example, our partner regulation research offers insights into the mechanisms underlying *why* different communication strategies have positive or negative effects on relationships, including how strategies foster or undermine perceived regard and motivate target responsiveness versus elicit resistance or complacency. By focusing on how partners can and do influence each other, we have also illustrated how partners might be able to build greater security with anxiously attached individuals, thereby protecting their relationship from the destructive impulses associated with chronic rejection sensitivity. Because such buffering attempts might be misinterpreted by insecure intimates or may be more effective when

perceived as spontaneous and authentic, the importance of the partner's insecurity regulation can only be known if one measures the partner's actual behavior and responses.

Despite the advances that can be made by adopting a dyadic regulation perspective, many important questions remain unanswered, and many aspects of dyadic regulation are still ripe for exploration. In what follows, we consider several directions for future research, first exploring extensions to the topics covered in this chapter and then applying a dyadic regulation approach to new areas of potential investigation.

### ***Partner Regulation***

We know little about the factors that shape the degree to which people engage in partner regulation, adopt specific types of tactics, or are responsive when targeted for change. People who believe that couples are either destined to be together or not, or who possess unrealistic and rigid expectations, tend to be less forgiving when their partners are not meeting their expectations (Campbell et al., 2001; Knee, Patrick & Lonsbary, 2003), and they should react with greater disappointment and negativity in regulation contexts. It has recently been discovered, for instance, that women who believe that men should cherish, revere, and provide for them display more hostile communication strategies, both as agents and targets of regulation (Overall, Sibley & Tan, 2011). Partner regulation probably challenged their romantic and idealized images of relationships; wanting change implies that partners are not their "Prince Charming," and being targeted for change suggests they are not being put on a pedestal.

In contrast, people who believe that relationships grow and develop through efforts to maintain and improve them may be more willing to initiate and receive regulation in order to improve their relationships and might do so in a more constructive manner (Knee et al., 2003; see also chapter 9). However, because these individuals believe that partners and relationships can change and improve, they may also experience steeper drops in satisfaction if their regulation efforts are unsuccessful and their relationships do not improve. Indeed, the failure of targets to improve behaviors that agents perceive targets *can* change and control ought to amplify agents' dissatisfaction and generate further resentment. So, the easier Helen thinks it is for Matthew to reduce his work hours, the more dissatisfied she will be if Matthew continues to prioritize work over spending quality time together.

Power and dependence are also likely to shape partner regulation processes. People who hold or want to possess greater power in their relationships are likely to use more direct and hostile regulation strategies when seeking change in their partners, and they may be more resistant when targeted for change. For example, men who endorse Hostile Sexism, an ideology that centers on protecting men's power relative to women, resist their partner's influence by adopting more hostile regulation strategies (Overall et al., 2011). Intimates who score high in attachment avoidance, and are motivated to protect their independence and autonomy, also tend to resist their partner's regulation efforts and fail to improve targeted self-attributes (Hui & Bond, 2009). Such resistance might provide the illusion of personal control, but it leads to less successful resolution of relationship problems, greater negativity and hostility in the partner, and eventual relationship damage (Overall et al., 2011).

Individuals who are more dependent on their relationships because they have fewer favorable alternatives, are more committed than their partners are, or perceive their partners are "out of their league" should show a different pattern (Rusbult, Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). Greater dependence might produce heightened vigilance and responsiveness to the partner's regulation efforts to ensure the partner remains satisfied. Dependent individuals might also withhold their own regulation desires and efforts for fear of upsetting their partner. This might keep relationships steady in the short term because the more powerful partner gets what she or he wants from the relationship. Ultimately, however, when dependent partners consistently avoid rocking the boat, they risk feeling like a doormat because their needs and desires are continually overlooked (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005).

Feelings of relationship security may also play an important role in these processes. For example, people who are less secure of their partner's regard, such as people high in attachment anxiety or low in self-esteem, might have dual reactions to the need for regulation. Their dependence and desire to maintain their relationship might produce caution in their attempts to produce desired changes in their partners, yet their tendency for hurt and dissatisfaction might also produce more negative and forceful reactions to partner discrepancies. Perhaps more straightforward is how insecure individuals ought to react when targeted for change by their partner. Sensitivities to rejection should both magnify the sting of the partner's regulation attempts

(via declines in perceived regard, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction) and also motivate defensive self-protective reactions, such as hostile resistance to change.

Finally, self-regulation theories (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987) point to several important processes not yet incorporated into models of partner regulation. We offer a few examples here. Whether regulation attempts are motivated by a promotion focus (approaching relationship goals and focusing on relationship growth) or a prevention focus (trying to avoid loss of connection and relationship failure) is likely to affect the way regulation is conducted and the consequences that ensue (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). A promotion focus might lead to more achievable regulation goals, more positive and direct regulation tactics, and greater eventual success, whereas a prevention focus might produce more indirect and negative tactics, greater anxiety and dissatisfaction with the partner, and less successful self and partner regulation attempts.

The evaluation of regulation success and its associated consequences should also be influenced by the rate of change of targeted behaviors (Carver & Scheier, 1998). In addition to the overall amount of change demonstrated (e.g., how much Matthew has been putting aside work to spend quality time with Helen), the speed with which targets have changed (e.g., how long it took Matthew to respond to Helen's initial requests) and the amount of regulation effort agents must exert to produce change (e.g., whether Helen had to resort to threats before Matthew finally met her desires) should shape subsequent regulation. Helen's regulation attempts will become more intense, and probably more direct and negative, if her initial attempts yield minimal change. And, regardless of whether or not such attempts are eventually successful, because Helen had to try so hard for so long to change Matthew's behavior, she might evaluate the same amount of change (e.g., hours engaged in activities together) less positively than if he had changed immediately.

The history of regulation successes and failures should also influence whether and how people engage in partner regulation. Prior success ought to generate feelings of greater efficacy in producing change and improving the relationship (Bandura, 1992), and thus create more optimistic and constructive future regulation attempts (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). The more that people have been unsuccessful in their regulation efforts, in contrast, the less likely they should believe they can improve

their relationships, and the more negatively they should react to desired changes. And if they are incapable of improving their relationships, the more they should become resigned to enduring the problem behavior or withdrawing entirely from the relationship.

There are several other avenues for reconciling inconsistencies between perceptions and ideal standards that do not focus on altering the partner. For example, individuals commonly recast their expectations to more closely fit the reality of their partners (Fletcher et al., 2000), perceive their partners to more closely resemble their ideal than they actually do (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), and enhance negative partner qualities by associating unfavorable attributes with more virtuous traits (Murray & Holmes, 1999). When past regulation attempts have repeatedly failed, target characteristics may be perceived as too difficult to change, or attempts to produce change might be viewed as too threatening. If, on balance, people are relatively satisfied with their relationship, individuals may resolve desired changes cognitively rather than via behavioral regulation. Thus, rather than trying to change the amount of time that Matthew spends at work, Helen may lower the importance she places on spending fun times together and focus more on Matthew's ambition, success, and resources (Fletcher et al., 2000). Future research should tease apart the conditions under which individuals use these different types of cognitive tactics versus attempting to change aspects of the relationship directly.

### *Regulating Insecurities*

Another area ripe for future investigation is whether, and the conditions under which, individuals who differ in chronic relationship securities become motivated to differentially regulate their romantic partners. We have already discussed what the partners of anxiously attached, rejection sensitive, and/or low self-esteem people are likely to do to reassure their partners and alleviate their incessant relationship worries. Returning to the beginning of this chapter, once Helen realized that Matthew worried about not living up to her standards, she changed the way in which she interacted with Matthew by avoiding situations that could elicit his worries, concealing minor relationship dissatisfactions and concerns, and repeatedly expressing her love for and acceptance of him.

There is, however, an interesting flipside to this example. Highly anxious, rejection sensitive, and/or low-self-esteem people such as Matthew should also

be motivated to regulate their partners, not only in an attempt to create and sustain greater felt security but also to create and sustain higher levels of dependence in the relationship. Making one's partner feel more dependent on the relationship should increase the likelihood that partners will remain in it (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001). Murray and her colleagues (Murray et al., 2009) refer to this process as dependence assurance. Highly anxious, rejection-sensitive, and/or low-self-esteem people could achieve dependence assurance via several partner regulation tactics, most of which are likely to involve offering unique rewards or novel experiences that alternative partners cannot deliver (see Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). For example, Matthew may try to make Helen more dependent on him and their relationship by being especially proficient in areas where Helen is not, such as managing the household finances or organizing regular contact with friends and family. Matthew might also attempt to increase Helen's dependence by figuring out what makes him most unique and special in the eyes of Helen. He may, for instance, realize that he is exceptionally good at consoling Helen when she gets upset, and that they feel much closer as a couple after Matthew helps Helen calm down. As a result, Matthew may become acutely cognizant of situations that tend to trigger distress in Helen so that he can always be there to quickly alleviate her negative feelings. At the extreme, when Matthew feels particularly insecure about Helen's love, he might even allow some "minor crisis" to occur so that he can assume the role of the wonderful consoler and reap the benefits of Helen's increased dependence and resulting commitment to the relationship.

One of the strengths of attachment theory is that it differentiates two types of insecure people: anxiously attached individuals (who worry that relationship partners will eventually leave them and, thus, are hypervigilant) and avoidantly attached individuals (who worry about losing their independence and autonomy and, thus, are hypovigilant; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Up to this point in the chapter, we have said little about the types of partner regulation strategies or tactics that are likely to be relevant to avoidant people. The partners of avoidant individuals might automatically engage regulation strategies to counteract the distancing tactics enacted by highly avoidant individuals. Withdrawal from conflict, for example, is often met with greater demanding behavior (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). As described previously, lower levels of commitment in one partner

tend to heighten dependence in the other, resulting in dependence-balancing strategies, which can include attempts to increase closeness, supportiveness, and/or regard. These actions are likely to impinge on the autonomy of avoidant individuals and elicit additional defensive maneuvers by them (Overall & Sibley, 2009). This dyadic regulation cycle suggests how attachment avoidance can be maintained across time in relationships.

But, as with attachment anxiety, recent research indicates that secure relationship partners might be able to buffer against the defenses of highly avoidant partners. Simpson and his colleagues (2007) videotaped dating couples as they discussed a problem in their relationship. The authors then identified the specific points during each discussion when one dyad member became visibly distressed. At these specific time points, they then coded for how distressed the individual appeared, what type and amount of support (instrumental versus emotional) the partner provided, and how quickly the individual calmed down during the 5 to 10 seconds immediately following the support attempt. Individuals who had avoidant relationships with their parents were more calmed by instrumental support (e.g., partners' statements of how to "fix" or solve the problem), whereas those who had secure relationships with their parents were more calmed by emotional support (e.g., partners' attempts to console, reassure, or soothe them). This suggests that the use of instrumental support tactics may be most effective at reducing negative affect in avoidant individuals, which the partners of highly avoidant people could enact to improve the well-being of not only their avoidant partners but also their relationships.

On the flipside, how might avoidant people attempt to regulate their partners, particularly in stressful situations? Highly avoidant individuals do not enjoy being "caregivers," they get uncomfortable when other people become distressed or need reassurance, and they are motivated to terminate their own as well as others' distress as quickly as possible (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Thus, when their partners are upset and turn to them for support, highly avoidant persons should use strategies or tactics that dissipate their partners' negative affect as quickly and completely as possible without having to provide excessive emotional support. We suspect that these regulation tactics are likely to include giving concrete advice about what might be done to fix, ignore, or downplay the problem. Even though instrumental support should be more comfortable for avoidant individuals to give and receive, whether

it will successfully comfort the partners of avoidant individuals will depend on their partner's needs. When disclosing emotional reactions to a stressor, recipients feel more understood when they receive emotional rather than informational forms of support (Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner & Gardner, 2007). A blanket instrumental approach, therefore, might leave the partners of avoidant individuals' feeling misunderstood and uncared for as they accurately determine that their partners simply want the problem to go away.

The degree to which avoidant individuals can be responsive to their partner's support or disclosures should also depend on the security of their partners. If their partners are secure, they might be able to seek support and encouragement in more flexible ways that circumvent the defenses typically associated with attachment avoidance. In contrast, partners who are high in attachment anxiety, who yearn to forge intimacy at every opportunity and react with hostility when their partners do not provide the support they crave, are likely to seek support and intimacy in more demanding and threatening ways. Examining responsiveness within capitalization interactions (when couples disclose positive events to each other), Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, and Frazier (2011) documented exactly this pattern. The lack of responsiveness typical of highly avoidant individuals was most pronounced when their partners were highly anxious, but it was eliminated when their partners scored low on attachment anxiety (i.e., when their partners were more secure). Future research should explore how secure partners seek connection, support, and responsiveness in ways that bypass the distancing strategies typically enacted by avoidant individuals.

### ***Applying a Dyadic Regulation Perspective to Relationship Processes***

We think the dyadic regulation perspective we have presented can be applied to other important relationship processes. Our consideration of attachment processes above highlights that support within relationships often involves dyadic regulation. Support frequently entails attempts to alleviate a target's distress (i.e., regulate his or her emotions), bolster a target's self-worth and efficacy (i.e., regulate his or her security and perceived competence), reappraise the situation and offer helpful information (i.e., influence a target's perceptions of the problem), and tangibly facilitate coping by performing tasks that reduce stress or overcome

the problem (i.e., directly contributing to a target's self-regulation).

Much of the literature investigating partner support also adopts a dyadic perspective, which is crucial to understanding how behaviors shape relationships. Recognizing that partner support is only "support" if it produces intended benefits for recipients, research has revealed that partner support does not always help. As noted above, whether or not behavior is actually supportive depends on the needs of the recipient, such as whether they prefer receiving emotional versus instrumental forms of support. Obvious (direct) support can also produce unintended costs, including drops in recipients' competence and self-efficacy, whereas support that is delivered yet not recognized by recipients (i.e., "invisible support") reduces distress and enhances coping (see Bolger, Zuckerman & Kessler, 2000; Howland & Simpson, 2010). Furthermore, when partners are supportive and individuals learn they can rely on their partner's help, this reduces the amount of time people direct toward their own goals, presumably because they now believe they will achieve their own goals with less effort (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011).

These dyadic effects inform regulation processes in other domains. Partner regulation strategies that do not feel like influence attempts, such as Helen taking up one of Matthew's hobbies so that the two can spend more time together, might improve relationships without risking decrements in target regard. By circumventing defensiveness, this type of "invisible" regulation might also evoke reciprocity, such as Matthew attending to some of Helen's personal interests. Effective regulation is also likely to involve finding the proper balance between regulating too much versus too little. Not protecting the partner enough from threatening thoughts or events can allow rejection-sensitivity processes to invade relationship interactions. However, protecting the partner too much might undermine felt security by communicating that he or she is not capable of managing the relationship and restricting personal or relationship growth. Overregulation might also foster increased dependence as insecure targets rely on their partner almost entirely to build and sustain their self-esteem.

A dyadic regulation approach that focuses on the outcomes of both partners also highlights important support processes that have yet to be examined. Although the impact of support on the recipient is clearly important, support that benefits the recipient may have costs for the support

provider (agent of support). Similar to when loyal positive-indirect strategies go unrecognized, the effective provision of invisible support could lead agents of support to feel unappreciated as recipients reap benefits without recognizing their partner's numerous efforts. When individuals provide strong and positive support to their partners, they often have fewer resources for coping with their *own* stressors. Moreover, some individuals might purposefully focus on their partner's needs and goals to the detriment of their own. More dependent partners, for example, might try to increase their relational value by helping their partner achieve his or her personal goals (Fitzsimons, 2010). Focusing too many regulatory resources on the partner could result in individuals failing to reach their own goals over time. Thus, examining support from a dyadic regulation perspective propels research in several novel directions.

Other dyadic processes already identified might also inform the dyadic regulation perspective we have proposed. Daily diary studies examining affect coregulation, for example, provide solid evidence that partners' moods and emotions tend to covary or converge with each other, such that increases in negative affect or stress experienced by one partner are associated with similar changes in the other partner (e.g., Butner, Diamond, & Hick, 2007; Saxbe & Repetti, 2010). Dyadic regulation effects, therefore, are likely to occur automatically throughout the daily course of relationships, including emotional contagion, health-related routines, and the regulation of desired attitudes and behaviors.

What remains less clear is whether automatic emotion coregulation is good or bad for personal and relationship well-being. The dyadic transmission of negative affect occurs more strongly in individuals who score high in attachment anxiety or are low in power (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003; Butner et al., 2007), whereas relationship satisfaction is concurrently associated with individuals being less affected by their partner's negative mood and stress (Saxbe & Repetti, 2010). These effects insinuate that being influenced by dyadic regulation processes can be harmful, at least to the person being "infected" by their partner's negativity. However, the degree to which partners are synchronized or attuned to one another is an important component of attachment relationships and could enhance closeness (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Furthermore, the automatic adoption of mood states that are not relationship related (e.g., sadness, disappointment, or anger *not* directed toward the partner) by the

partner might signal something important, such as validation, understanding, and evidence that the partner shares the individuals' experiences. In sum, the costs and benefits of emotion coregulation may differ according to whether one instigates or is "caught in" the affective chain.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter discussing the relationship of Matthew and Helen to exemplify an important and surprisingly understudied process that occurs in all well-functioning relationships—how partners shape one another via both self and partner regulation processes. Although their relationship had a somewhat rocky start, we discussed the many ways in which Helen learned how to regulate Matthew's emotions and behaviors in situations that triggered his worries and vulnerabilities. Helen's effective partner regulation tactics, in turn, helped Matthew eventually regulate his own emotions and behaviors more effectively, which had numerous positive consequences for Matthew, Helen, and their relationship. Once Matthew was able to adopt a couple-centered, long-term view of their relationship, Helen was able to achieve several plans and goals that she might not have been able to realize without the help of a supportive, dedicated, and benevolent partner.

Armed with greater security, Matthew also developed the confidence to try and change aspects of his relationship he found dissatisfying, like the amount of sex he and Helen had and how much Helen contributed to the household chores. Helen was also able to target aspects of Matthew that she would like changed, like spending less time at work and more time engaging in fun, relaxing activities together. Because targeted partners tend to try to change targeted features, these types of partner regulation acts can improve relationships.

Thus, high-quality partner regulation can have myriad benefits. However, we have also shown the many ways in which dyadic regulation can have unintended costs. In trying to bolster Matthew's self-esteem and security within the relationship, Helen might become tired of being the "strong" partner and increasingly dissatisfied that her needs get overlooked. She also might need to adopt very soft and positive regulation strategies to bring about change in Matthew; although this would protect Matthew's feelings of regard, attaining desired improvements would be a long, slow process. On the other hand, if Helen took a more direct, blunt approach, this would produce more successful

change and bolster her satisfaction but seriously undermine Matthew's perceptions of himself and their relationship.

To truly understand the costs and benefits of regulation processes in relationships, therefore, requires understanding the consequences for both partners. Adopting this type of dyadic perspective on regulation processes in close relationships pushes research in new directions and opens many interesting and important pathways for future research. We hope that this chapter lights the way for several future paths.

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