CHAPTER 16

Regulation Processes in Romantic Relationships

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Jake and Sarah are in a committed romantic relationship. They are relatively happy, but like most couples, they disagree about some issues, which tends to cause conflict in their relationship. For example, Jake and Sarah argue about how to manage their finances, and they have difficulty coordinating their schedules to spend time together. When managing these common difficulties, Jake tries to get Sarah to prioritize time together over work commitments, whereas Sarah tries to persuade Jake to spend less money, and she encourages him to take opportunities that would enable them to be more financially secure in the future. Initially, these relationship improvement attempts seemed to make their problems worse. When Sarah discussed Jake's earning prospects, Jake would feel criticized and devalued by Sarah and react defensively by accusing Sarah of not caring for him. Such reactions made it difficult for Jake and Sarah to resolve disagreements.

Jake's insecure reactions were fueled by chronic concerns that Sarah would eventually abandon him. In past relationships, Jake felt as if he could never fully "measure up" to what his romantic partners wanted or expected, and some of his relationships ended badly. Jake really wanted to have a better relationship with Sarah, but he still worried that he might not be able to meet many of Sarah's hopes and expectations, especially when she voiced dissatisfaction or wanted him to change in some way.

As their relationship developed, however, Sarah became aware of Jake's insecurity and vulnerabilities. Because she valued their relationship and wanted it to last, Sarah started to change how she interacted with Jake. For instance, when they discussed areas of disagreement or aspects of the relationship with which she was dissatisfied, Sarah would clearly express her unconditional love for and acceptance of Jake, and she would go out of her way to reassure Jake

> that she was strongly committed to him. When Sarah did this, Jake would feel less anxious, and his insecure tendencies would subside, which resulted in more successful problem resolution. As Jake's insecurity began to dissipate over time, he was able to respond to Sarah's relationship improvement attempts in more constructive ways, which helped both Sarah and Jake remain satisfied with their relationship.

This hypothetical relationship highlights an important and understudied set of processes that characterize most couples—intimate partners often try to influence and shape each other through dyadic regulation processes. Sarah's actions reflect the operation of two key dyadic regulation processes. First, Sarah's efforts to increase Jake's attention to finances reflect her attempts to influence or change his attributes that are causing conflict or dissatisfaction in order to improve their relationship (*partner regulation*). Second, Sarah's efforts to down-regulate or buffer Jake's negative reactions when he feels insecure reflect attempts to buffer the relationship from the damaging behaviors associated with attachment insecurity (*partner buffering*).

These two dyadic regulation processes are the focus of this chapter. We begin by reviewing key ideas and findings associated with self-regulation processes as they relate to close relationships. We then discuss *partner regulation*, which involves individuals trying to change dissatisfying attributes of their partners that cause conflict or problems in their relationships. We review evidence regarding the conditions that motivate this type of partner regulation, then consider how and why different types of partner regulation attempts differentially affect *agents of regulation* (i.e., individuals who want to produce change in their partners), *targets of regulation* (i.e., partners who are the subject of change attempts), and the quality of their relationship.

In the second half of the chapter, we turn to the second type of dyadic regulation process—buffering insecure partners. We overview specific ways in which individuals can soothe or down-regulate the negative thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors that anxiously or avoidantly attached partners commonly exhibit during threatening relationship interactions. We also consider how partner buffering influences *agents of regulation* (i.e., the individual attempting to buffer attachment insecurity), *targets of regulation* (i.e., the reactions of the insecure partner), and the relationship as a whole.

SELF-REGULATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Most self-regulation theories recognize the critical role that significant others play in self-regulation processes. For example, self-directed behavioral change usually occurs when individuals perceive discrepancies between their goals or ideals and their current standing on these goals/ideals (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987). Large discrepancies between self-perceived goals and ideal standards or expectations make people feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied, which typically instigates actions intended to reduce these discrepancies. However, many of the standards and expectations governing people's self-regulation efforts are established by close others (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Significant others also motivate and launch goal pursuit, sometimes unconsciously (see Finkel, Fitzsimons, & vanDellen, Chapter 15, this volume). For example, priming thoughts of close others (e.g., parent, close friend, or romantic partner) increases individuals' intentions and commitment to obtain the attributes valued by primed others, which results in greater persistence and success on tasks related to those attributes (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003).

Besides guiding the goals and ideal standards that individuals strive to attain, the success of self-regulation efforts is also shaped by relationship processes. For example, individuals tend to be more successful at achieving their personal goals when their romantic partners support their pursuit of these goals (Feeney, 2007; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). Individuals are also more likely to move closer to their ideal self-concepts if they perceive that their partners treat them as if they already possess these ideal attributes (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). Individuals also evaluate their partners and relationships more positively if their partners help them achieve their personal goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Overall et al., 2010).

Self-regulation processes also play a key role in maintaining social connections with significant others. According to the sociometer model (Leary, 2004), for example, when people feel less valued as relationship partners, they tend to experience negative emotions and temporarily lower self-esteem. This, in turn, motivates individuals to increase their social inclusion with others in adaptive ways, for example, by meeting the wishes of others or being more helpful to them. The use of effective relationship building and maintenance behaviors, however, depends on how well individuals are able to control (regulate) their emotions and actions, especially in stressful or challenging situations. Those who have greater self-regulatory strength are better at controlling their negative impulses, which allows them to respond to hurtful or damaging partner behaviors in more constructive ways (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). As a result, well-regulated individuals are less likely to experience negative interpersonal outcomes, especially during stressful or difficult interpersonal exchanges (Ayduk et al., 2001).

Nearly all of this prior work examining regulation processes in relationships has focused on how *individuals* regulate themselves. Within relationships, however, partners also attempt to regulate *each other's* thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In the next section, we describe how self-regulation models can be used to understand some of the causes and consequences of partner regulation.

PARTNER REGULATION IN RELATIONSHIPS

Almost by definition, the interdependent nature of close relationships implies that people's goals and desires often depend on their *partners* thinking, feeling, and behaving in desired and consistent ways (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Sarah, for example, might want to save money to buy a new house, but Jake may prefer to spend money on extravagant vacations. Jake may be motivated to spend more time with Sarah, but no matter how much time he devotes to their relationship, he cannot achieve this valued goal unless Sarah prioritizes time spent together. Such contrasting desires and goals are the foundation of many conflicts in close relationships, and they are also the reason individuals frequently try to change their partner's attitudes and behaviors—a process called *partner regulation*.

Figure 16.1 outlines some of the basic causes and consequences of partner regulation. The left-hand side of the figure applies basic self-regulation principles to identify when individuals should be motivated to regulate their partners. First, individuals not only

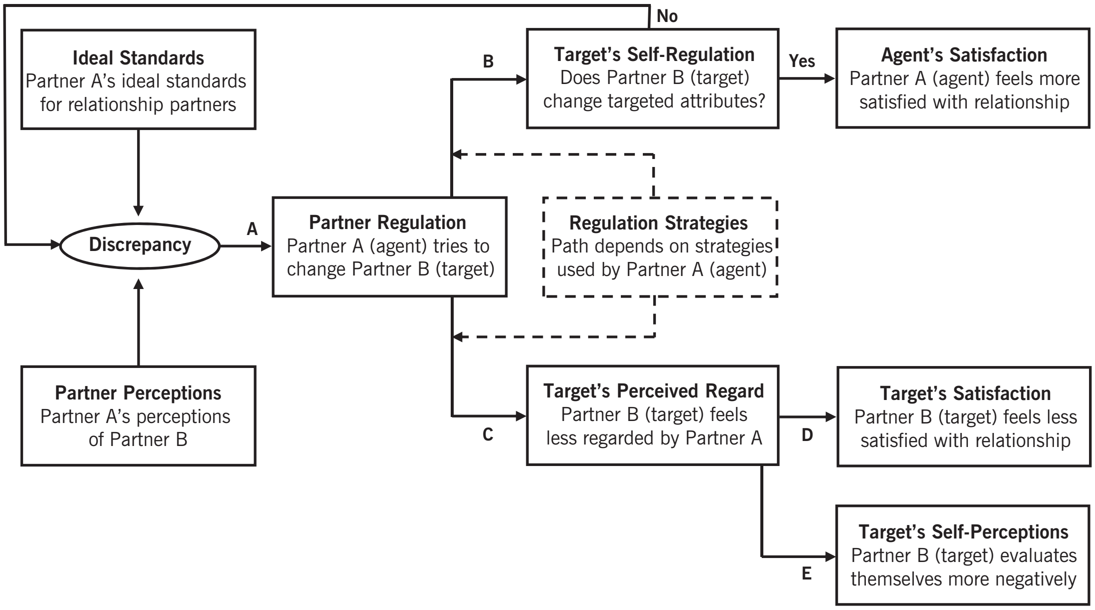
No
Ideal Standards
Partner A's ideal standards for relationship partners
B
Target's Self-Regulation
Does Partner B (target) change targeted attributes?
Yes
Agent's Satisfaction
Partner A (agent) feels more satisfied with relationship
Discrepancy
A
Partner Regulation
Partner A (agent) tries to change Partner B (target)
Regulation Strategies
Path depends on strategies used by Partner A (agent)
Partner Perceptions
Partner A's perceptions of Partner B
C
Target's Perceived Regard
Partner B (target) feels less regarded by Partner A
D
Target's Satisfaction
Partner B (target) feels less satisfied with relationship
E
Target's Self-Perceptions
Partner B (target) evaluates themselves more negatively

FIGURE 16.1. The causes and consequences of partner regulation attempts.

have expectations and ideal standards that motivate their own self-regulation but they also have ideal standards that are used to evaluate their relationship partners (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Second, just as discrepancies between self-related perceptions and standards produce dissatisfaction and spur self-regulation efforts, discrepancies between an individual's partner perceptions and partner ideals also produce dissatisfaction and an increased likelihood of relationship dissolution (Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Thus, as shown in Path A in Figure 16.1, larger discrepancies between partner perceptions and ideal standards should instigate attempts to change the partner in order to move the relationship closer to an individual's ideal standards (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006).

A key difference between self-regulation and partner regulation, however, is that partner regulation attempts may often make the situation worse rather than lead to intended relationship improvements. Indeed, Overall and colleagues (2006) found that more strenuous partner regulation attempts are typically associated with *lower* relationship quality. There are two reasons why greater partner regulation can have this damaging effect. First, as shown by Path B in Figure 16.1, the success of partner regulation attempts depends on whether targets respond by changing the targeted attributes. If Jake is successful at persuading Sarah to reduce her work hours in order to spend more quality time together, Jake's evaluation of Sarah and their relationship should improve. If Sarah, however, continues to work overtime, Jake is likely to become even more dissatisfied and believe that Sarah's commitment to their relationship is lower than he initially thought. In the studies reported by Overall and colleagues, regulation agents (those trying to change their partners) usually believed their regulation attempts were relatively ineffective at producing desired changes in targeted partners. As a consequence, regulation agents viewed their partners more negatively and developed even larger discrepancies between perceptions of their partner and their ideal standards (see the "No" path near the top of Figure 16.1).

A second danger associated with partner regulation is that receiving regulation attempts may provoke negative feelings and behavioral reactions in targets. Overall and colleagues (2006), for example, discovered that stronger attempts to change the partner are associated with the targeted partner feeling less valued and less accepted. When Sarah tries to increase their joint savings by asking Jake to work more or improve his job skills, this may communicate to Jake that she is dissatisfied with his earning potential. Partner regulation attempts, therefore, can provide powerful signals regarding how the agent of regulation is thinking and feeling about the target of regulation. When individuals behave in a positive, prorelationship fashion, such as forgiving transgressions or accommodating negative behavior, these actions convey trust and acceptance to their partner (Weiselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). However, when relationship behavior communicates discontent with the relationship or a desire for change, this conveys to the partner declining regard and potential rejection (Overall et al., 2006; Overall & Fletcher, 2010).

Path C in Figure 16.1 indicates how persistent regulation attempts can affect targeted partners' perceptions of regard. Supporting this pathway, Overall and Fletcher (2010) found that the more individuals receive regulation attempts from their partners, the more negatively regarded they feel across the next 6 months. As depicted by Path D, perceptions of a partner's regard and acceptance, in turn, strongly influence people's feelings of security and satisfaction in the relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Individuals who meet what their partner ideally wants or expects report being more satisfied (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001), whereas those who realize they do not meet their partner's ideal standards report much lower satisfaction across time (Overall et al., 2006; Overall & Fletcher, 2010).

Perceptions of a partner's regard can also affect how well romantic relationships function in the long-term. People who believe their partners view them negatively often harbor chronic insecurities and react more negatively to relationship difficulties (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). As a result, the reductions in perceived regard arising from partner regulation attempts may generate more negative responses by targeted partners that can negatively impact the relationship. Moreover, as shown in Path E of Figure 16.1, being the brunt of continued partner regulation attempts can also undermine the way targets view themselves. Relationship interactions can provide potent information about one's own qualities. When those interactions indicate that the partner's regard is low, individuals have more negative views of themselves (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Furthermore, because receiving regulation attempts conveys low regard, it can also damage targets' self-evaluations by producing more negative self-perceptions and eroding self-esteem across time (Overall & Fletcher, 2010).

In summary, the underpinnings of partner regulation processes are very similar to self-regulation processes: Discrepancies between how partners are perceived and the ideal standards that individuals hold for their partners motivate regulation attempts (see the left side of Figure 16.1). However, because partner regulation involves two people —the agent of regulation and the target of regulation—the outcomes of partner regulation are more complex and potentially perilous. As depicted by Path B in Figure 16.1, the success of partner regulation inevitably depends on whether (and the degree to which) targets change in ways that regulation agents desire. Although regulation attempts can motivate change in targeted partners and thereby improve agents' relationship satisfaction, targets may often resist these influence attempts. Unsuccessful regulation attempts, in turn, may exacerbate agents' negative evaluations and dissatisfaction. And even regulation attempts that successfully produce desired change may leave negative effects on regulation targets' relationship satisfaction and self-perceptions because targets understand that agents are dissatisfied with targeted attributes. Returning to Jake and Sarah, the more Sarah tries to improve Jake's earning potential, the more Jake may (1) believe that Sarah is unhappy with his current status and income (Figure 16.1, Path C), (2) become less satisfied with the relationship (Path D), and (3) begin to view himself more negatively (Path E).

Partner Regulation versus Self-Regulation

At first glance, partner regulation appears to be problematic even though it may often be intended to improve relationships. Unlike self-regulation attempts, the potential harm that targeted partners can experience when subjected to partner regulation suggests that these attempts may often be detrimental to relationships. Many relationship therapies, in fact, claim that relationship improvement requires partner acceptance (Christensen et al., 2004), not blaming the partner for his or her personal deficits, and not focusing on aspects of the partner that might be creating or perpetuating relationship problems (see Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994). According to these views, a more constructive approach is to refrain from partner regulation altogether and focus on changing problematic features of the self instead.

To explore these issues, Hira and Overall (2011) compared partner-focused and self-focused attempts intended to improve romantic relationships. They found that blaming and trying to regulate the partner was less successful in producing desired relationship changes, and it was associated with lowered relationship quality. Successful change of self-attributes, conversely, was related to greater improvement of the targeted problem(s) in the relationship, but successful self-change did not yield greater relationship satisfaction.

Why does successful self-change that apparently improves relationship problems not translate into better relationship quality? The most plausible explanation is that improving relationship problems requires change by *both* partners. An improvement made by one individual is not likely to resolve dissatisfaction if the partner's contributions to the problem remain unchanged. Consistent with this notion, Hira and Overall (2011) also found that when *partners* were perceived as attempting to change themselves and *partners* also reported being more successful at their own self-regulation attempts, individuals experienced greater relationship improvement *and* reported more positive relationship evaluations.

These findings illustrate the importance of the differences between partner regulation and self-regulation by highlighting that partner regulation has different consequences and outcomes for the agent of regulation and the target of regulation. Although partner regulation can carry costs for the targeted partner in terms of lower felt regard (Figure 16.1, Path C), more negative relationship evaluations (Path D), and reduced self-esteem (Path E), the satisfaction of regulation agents improves only when the targeted partner makes the desired changes (see Path B). Moreover, the studies documenting the harmful effects of regulation on targeted partners (Paths C, D, and E in Figure 16.1) have found that targets frequently respond to their partner's regulation attempts by trying to change the targeted attributes (Overall et al., 2006; Overall & Fletcher, 2010). Thus, the more Sarah tries to change Jake's financial security, the more Jake will try to improve these attributes, despite the fact that he feels less well regarded by Sarah's actions. The resulting improvement, however, helps Sarah feel more satisfied (Path B "Yes"). These divergent outcomes suggest that the key to successful partner regulation is propelling targets to make desired changes (Path B) without undermining their perceived regard, self-evaluations, and relationship satisfaction (Paths C, D, and E). As indicated by the dashed lines in the middle of Figure 16.1, whether both positive outcomes can be achieved depends on how partner regulation attempts are enacted.

Partner Regulation Strategies and Successful Outcomes for Agents and Targets

The manner in which individuals try to regulate their partners should provide diagnostic information to the targets of change. Being repeatedly subjected to negative influence strategies from one's partner, such as criticism, punishment, or threats, clearly conveys contempt and disregard to the targeted partner. Indeed, Overall and Fletcher (2010) found that the more partners used hostile and critical regulation strategies, the more targets reported declines in perceived regard and judged their relationships more negatively. Conversely, the use of more positive regulation strategies, such as expressing affection or validation during regulation attempts, appeared to offset the negative effects of partner regulation by communicating care and respect to the targeted partner. Cushioning regulation attempts with positivity and affection, in other words, seems to curtail the potentially damaging effects of partner regulation attempts for targeted partners (Path C, D, and E in Figure 16.1).

The use of positive influence strategies may not only convey higher regard to targeted partners, but it may also motivate them to work harder to change their problematic attributes. Jake's nagging and constant demands for change, for instance, are not likely to motivate Sarah to sacrifice her work to spend more time with him. Indeed, Overall and Fletcher (2010) found that targets are more reluctant to change when they perceive that their partners are using more negative regulation strategies, but they report being more receptive and responding better when their partners display more positive forms of influence. These findings fit nicely with other research showing that hostile communication tends to incite defensiveness and resistance in partners during couple conflict discussions (e.g., Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Weiss & Heyman, 1997).

On the other hand, as with the partner regulation processes outlined in Figure 16.1, the impact of negative communication ought to differ depending on whether an individual is the target of influence (who still wants to be valued) or the agent of influence (who is pressing for partner change). Several researchers have found that criticizing, blaming, or pressuring partners to make changes during conflict discussions predicts small but discernible *increases* in relationship satisfaction across time for the agent who is engaging in these negative influence or regulation strategies (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Paralleling these results, a few studies have indicated that positive forms of communication, such as agreement and humor, predict more negative long-term relationship evaluations by the agent expressing positivity during conflict, along with a *higher* probability of divorce (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

One explanation that may resolve these seemingly countervailing sets of findings involves partner regulation processes. Directly addressing a major problem and engaging in conflict may result in actually resolving the problem, perhaps because doing so motivates targeted partners to change their problematic attitudes or behaviors (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Interestingly, most of the negative behaviors that predict positive long-term relationship outcomes in longitudinal studies are active, direct, and partner-focused (e.g., criticism or blame), whereas most of the positive behaviors that predict poorer relationship outcomes are "soft" and tend to dampen overt conflict through the use of humor (e.g., validation or affection).

To address these ideas, Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009) classified communication strategies in terms of their valence (positive or negative) and directness (direct or indirect). This resulted in four global strategies (see Table 16.1; see also Overall & Simpson, 2013). Direct strategies are explicit, overt, and partner-focused. *Positive–direct* tactics (i.e., the specific behaviors used to enact a given strategy) include providing logical reasons for the desired change, weighing the pros and cons of different possible outcomes, and offering workable solutions. *Negative–direct* tactics include demanding change, insisting on getting one's way, and derogating or threatening the partner. Both positive and negative direct tactics involve clear expressions of discontent and strongly convey to the target the need for change. In the short term, these actions are likely to produce defensiveness and reduced felt regard in the targeted partner. By directly communicating the severity and importance of the problem, however, direct tactics should also motivate targets to make stronger and more consistent efforts to alter the problematic behavior.

Indirect strategies entail passive or covert ways of resolving issues and inducing desired change. *Positive–indirect* tactics include attempts to soften the conflict and convey positive regard to the targeted partner by minimizing the problem or focusing on positive partner characteristics. In the short term, this warm, accommodating behavior should reduce conflict and communicate greater regard. These tactics, however, also downplay the severity of the problem and, consequently, are less likely to spur appropriate changes within the targeted partner. *Negative–indirect* tactics include appealing to the partner's love or relationship obligations or portraying oneself as an innocent victim. These tactics should also be ineffective because they place the responsibility for change on the partner, without suggesting how improvements might be made.

Overall and colleagues (2009) examined the success of these four regulation strategies by measuring the degree to which each strategy was exhibited when romantic partners discussed specific aspects of the other that they wanted to see change. Each couple was then followed across time to determine whether the targeted partner actually changed the targeted attributes over the next 12 months. When agents used more negative–direct *or* positive–direct regulation strategies during their discussions, both partners perceived the discussions as being ineffective in motivating behavior change immediately postdiscussion. However, both positive– and negative–direct strategies forecasted *greater* change in targeted features over the subsequent year. That is, even though the use of direct approaches elicited more negative affect and lower regard in the short term, they successfully motivated the targeted partner to change his or her problematic behavior in the long run. Additionally, the more targeted partners changed, the more agents reported reductions in problem severity, and the happier they became with the relationship across time.

TABLE 16.1. The Consequences of Different Regulation Strategies for Targets and Agents of Regulation (Overall & Simpson, 2013)

Regulation strategies	Associated tactics	Outcome for target of regulation	Outcome for agent of regulation
Direct strategies			
Positive–direct	Outlining the causes and consequences of the problem, exploring potential alternatives, weighing up pros and cons, and facilitating constructive discussions to generate solutions.	Clearly expresses desire for change and dissatisfaction but provides direct course of action so 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 targets 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.
Indirect strategies			
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 so it maintains targets' relationship satisfaction. Downplays the severity of the problem so 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.	Does not clearly outline specific changes or how change can be made so 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.

In contrast, even though the use of positive–indirect strategies was associated with initial perceptions of success and less distress during the discussions from both partners, there was no connection between positive–indirect strategies and behavior change across time. A soft, tactful approach may protect targets' perceived regard and relationship satisfaction 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 his or her partner's dissatisfaction (also see Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995).

The different outcomes for agents and targets of regulation are listed in Table 16.1. For example, a negative–direct approach is damaging to targets of regulation, but it can have benefits for agents of regulation. The bluntness of direct tactics may trigger defensiveness and reduce targets' perceived regard in the short term, but by clearly communicating the severity of the problem, targets should be more inclined to change, resulting in desired improvement and greater long-term satisfaction for agents of change. On the other hand, a positive–indirect regulation approach may benefit targets but result in considerable costs for agents. Targets may not fully understand the need for change and may still feel sufficiently regarded by their partners; therefore, they fail to adjust their problematic behavior(s). The agent who wants change, however, may become increasingly dissatisfied as the targeted partner does nothing to improve the situation (Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010).

These very different outcomes for agents and targets of regulation suggest which types of regulation strategies might be most beneficial to relationships. Agent benefits should be greatest when direct strategies are used because these strategies motivate targets to enact necessary changes (shaping the direction and strength of Path B in Figure 16.1). In contrast, target benefits should be greater when positive strategies are used because these communications convey the partner's care, positive regard, and responsiveness (shaping the direction and strength of Path C in Figure 16.1). Improvements in problem resolution stemming from the use of direct regulation strategies, therefore, might be best accomplished when tactics that convey care and positive regard are displayed at the same time. Thus, a positive–direct strategy may often be the best one for improving relationships because it not only protects the satisfaction of agents and targets by motivating target change (Path B), but also the targeted partners' feelings that they are valued and loved (Path C).

All of this implies that successful partner regulation requires a well-balanced consideration of the needs of *both* partners, making this a truly dyadic process. Agents of regulation need to communicate in ways that maintain targets' felt-regard and self-worth, and targets must be sufficiently responsive to agents' desires and constructive influence attempts. The proper balance, however, may shift depending on several contextual factors. For example, when large discrepancies create serious relationship problems, it should be more important to utilize direct communication strategies to resolve issues, even if well-intentioned criticism and hostility needs to be expressed. However, direct and negative communication strategies are likely to be damaging when minor problems do not warrant a direct, tough approach (e.g., McNulty & Russell, 2010). Similarly, a more positive communication approach should be most beneficial when targeted partners' behaviors are not too discrepant from one's ideals or they are responding well to regulation attempts, but it may be very costly when protecting targets' regard means that problems and discrepancies remain unresolved and continue to fester across time (e.g., McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2004).

In summary, relationship partners need to adjust their regulation strategies to the importance and severity of particular problems (see Overall & Simpson, 2013). Regardless of whether problems are severe or minor, however, a positive–direct approach might be the optimal strategy in most situations. Direct communication provides the understanding and motivation necessary to help targets alter their problem-inducing attitudes and behaviors. Successful change by the target, in turn, should improve conditions within the relationship by communicating higher levels of commitment and responsiveness, thereby increasing the satisfaction of the partner who initially sought change. And by conveying care and positive regard, a positive–direct strategy should achieve all of this without undermining the targeted partner's felt security and self-worth. However, because some targets are likely to be especially sensitive to the declines in regard that partner regulation (and other threatening relationship interactions) may pose, it is important that agents of regulation behave in specific, context-dependent ways that soothe and reduce target defensiveness, and convey greater commitment, trust, and/or acceptance. As highlighted in the development of Jake and Sarah's relationship, described at the beginning of this chapter, some individuals may need to soothe their partner's insecurities in order to reduce target defensiveness before they can attempt to regulate dissatisfying attributes. This involves another type of dyadic regulation process: partner buffering.

REGULATING ATTACHMENT INSECURITY: BUFFERING VULNERABLE PARTNERS

To this point, we have discussed how individuals involved in romantic relationship seek to achieve their own relationship goals and happiness by attempting to change aspects of their partners that fail to match their partner/relationship ideal standards. We now turn to a different type of partner regulation process that is just as prevalent and important to do well in order to enhance relationships. Rather than trying to attain relationship ideals, this type of partner regulation focuses on helping targeted partners manage challenging relationship interactions well. We now discuss various ways in which individuals involved with insecurely attached romantic partners (i.e., those who are anxiously or avoidantly attached) are able to buffer these "vulnerable" partners from experiencing negative thoughts and feelings, and expressing destructive behaviors in potentially threatening situations. Similar to the partner regulation processes discussed earlier, successful buffering requires being sensitive to the needs of regulation targets (insecure individuals), as well as balancing the needs of the agent of regulation, who is attempting to care for his or her insecure mate. We begin by describing how anxiously and avoidantly attached individuals react to different kinds of threatening contexts, then describe a model outlining how individuals can buffer (regulate) the reactions of their insecurely attached partners. Following this, we review a series of studies documenting that partner regulation behaviors can improve the relationship for *both* partners by effectively reducing the likelihood that anxious and avoidant targets experience negative thoughts and feelings, and enact relationship-damaging behaviors.

Attachment Insecurity and Relationship Functioning

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), humans evolved to form strong emotional bonds with their caregivers (attachment figures) because doing so increased the chances of survival. Attachment bonds operate in both childhood and adulthood, and the attachment system becomes activated when individuals feel threatened, distressed, or challenged (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Depending on how they were treated by earlier attachment figures (e.g., parents, friends, romantic partners), individuals develop different ways of viewing and relating to their current attachment figures that reflect their specific attachment orientation. Securely attached people have received good, consistent care and support from their past attachment figures, so they develop positive views of themselves and others and turn to their attachment figures for comfort and support to reduce negative affect when they are upset. This collaborative, problem-focused style of coping helps securely attached people forge greater closeness and intimacy with their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

There are two primary forms of attachment insecurity. Anxiously attached people, who have received mixed or inconsistent care and support earlier in life, yearn for acceptance and closeness, yet they also worry that their partners may leave them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). For this reason, anxious individuals look for indications of their partner's love and possible rejection, which often generates considerable distress and sometimes dysfunctional behavior in relationship-threatening situations, particularly during relationship conflicts (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) or when partners do not offer sufficient support (Collins & Feeney, 2000). This hypervigilant form of coping allows anxious individuals to monitor and gain the attention of their partners, which makes them feel less insecure, at least temporarily. This form of coping, however, tends to generate anger and dissatisfaction in their romantic partners (Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999).

Avoidantly attached people have been consistently ignored or rejected by earlier attachment figures. Consequently, they learn that they cannot trust and depend on close others, especially in times of need. In response to this, they suppress their natural impulse to attain closeness and intimacy and become emotionally independent and self-reliant. When they are upset, avoidant individuals usually withdraw from their partners (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997) and are less inclined to seek or give support to their partners (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). This distancing strategy permits avoidant people to defensively maintain sufficient autonomy and independence so they can regulate their negative emotions and resolve distress on their own terms (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Both forms of insecurity typically destabilize relationships by undercutting satisfaction, aggravating relationship problems, and short-circuiting the positive experiences that might be gained from having happier partners and better functioning relationships (Feeney, 2008). However, the *partners* of insecure individuals may be able to regulate these individuals' insecurity to protect and stabilize the relationship (Overall & Lemay, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014). We now describe how we have conceptualized and studied the different ways in which relationship partners can (and do) buffer the typically negative thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors of anxiously and avoidantly attached individuals in relationship-threatening situations, focusing principally on conflict situations.

The Dyadic Regulation Model of Insecurity Buffering

Our recent research on this topic has been guided by the dyadic regulation model of insecurity buffering (Simpson & Overall, 2014), which addresses the way relationship partners can behave in attachment-relevant dyadic interactions (i.e., those that usually activate the attachment system). As shown in Figure 16.2 (top left), certain types of stressful or threatening events tend to trigger the prototypical concerns of insecurely attached people (targets). Their partners (agents), however, may be able to engage in buffering behaviors that reduce (down-regulate) the target's distress and therefore soothe him or her. Buffering behaviors can be enacted deliberately (consciously and intentionally) or automatically (nonconsciously or unintentionally) by agents. They can include offering reassurance of continued love and support, accommodating the target's wishes or needs, and/or providing the right type or amount of support the target needs to manage his or her emotions more effectively.

Buffering should be most successful when the agent's behavior is responsive to the specific concerns and needs of the target and his or her attachment orientation. Anxiously attached targets, for example, should benefit most from buffering behaviors that reassure them that they are loved and supported, such as the provision of clear and strong emotional support, direct attempts to meet their needs or desires, and/or easing their core relationship-relevant concerns. Avoidantly attached targets, on the other hand, should benefit more from buffering behaviors that allow them to maintain their autonomy and independence, such as using softer influence tactics when trying to change their problematic characteristics, providing instrumental forms of support designed to fix (resolve) the problem, and/or meeting their needs, while allowing them to retain a sense of control and still feel self-reliant.

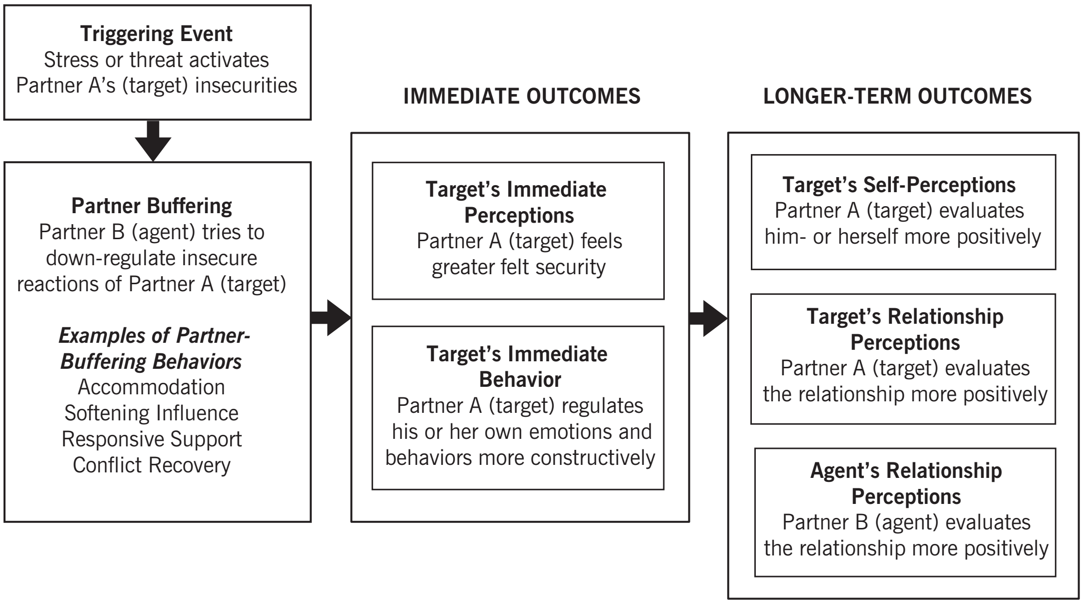
Triggering Event
Stress or threat activates Partner A's (target) insecurities
Partner Buffering
Partner B (agent) tries to down-regulate insecure reactions of Partner A (target)
Examples of Partner-Buffering Behaviors
Accommodation
Softening Influence
Responsive Support
Conflict Recovery
IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES
Target's Immediate Perceptions
Partner A (target) feels greater felt security
Target's Immediate Behavior
Partner A (target) regulates his or her own emotions and behaviors more constructively
LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES
Target's Self-Perceptions
Partner A (target) evaluates him- or herself more positively
Target's Relationship Perceptions
Partner A (target) evaluates the relationship more positively
Agent's Relationship Perceptions
Partner B (agent) evaluates the relationship more positively

FIGURE 16.2. The dyadic regulation model of insecurity buffering (Simpson & Overall, 2014).

If the buffering enacted by an agent works, insecure targets should report greater felt security during stressful or threatening interactions. This, in turn, should lead them to feel less distressed, manage their emotions more effectively, and behave more constructively (see the middle of Figure 16.2). If this pattern of stress/threat → responsive partner buffering → positive relationship perceptions and behaviors occurs repeatedly, targets should gradually come to view themselves more positively and report greater relationship satisfaction, and agents should report better relationship outcomes with their better-adjusted and happier insecure partners (see the right side of Figure 16.2).

Returning to Jake and Sarah, if Jake (who is anxiously attached) feels threatened by a major disagreement he and Sarah are having, Sarah may directly reassure Jake of her unwavering love, mention his many endearing traits, and clarify why she is so resolutely committed to their relationship (also see Lemay & Dudley, 2011). This buffering attempt should make Jake feel more secure during the discussion, which should allow him to feel better, gain control of his emotions, and act more constructively toward Sarah. If this cycle is continually repeated, Jake should begin automatically to associate Sarah with the dissipation of negative thoughts and feelings when he feels threatened, which should strengthen their emotional bond (especially for Jake; see Simpson, 2007). Over time, Jake should come to view himself as a truly valued partner, he should trust Sarah more, and their relationship ought to improve.

Dyadic Behavioral Observation Studies: Support for the Model

We have tested components of our model in several behavioral observation studies with romantic couples (see Figure 16.2). Most of these studies have examined conflict because this threatening context reliably elicits the cardinal insecurities of anxiously and avoidantly attached people, albeit for different reasons.

Buffering Anxiety during Conflict

Some of our research has investigated ways in which partners can and do buffer the destructive responses to conflict that anxiously attached individuals often display. Tran and Simpson (2009), for example, videotaped married couples while they discussed important habits that each spouse wanted to change in the other. This task should activate concerns about rejection, particularly in anxiously attached people. The authors assessed each spouse's emotional reactions in each discussion (one in which the husband discussed changes he wanted his wife to make, and the other in which the wife discussed changes she wanted her husband to make). Trained observers then coded the accommodation behaviors enacted by each partner (e.g., inhibiting the urge to hurt or retaliate against the partner, trying to maintain the relationship by calming the partner and working to solve the problem). On average, anxiously attached individuals felt more negative emotions and exhibited fewer accommodation behaviors during the discussions than did less anxious people. However, the partners of anxious individuals displayed more accommodative behaviors if they were more committed to the relationship, and this led anxious individuals to feel greater acceptance and more positive emotions during their discussions. Illustrating the immediate benefits of partner buffering (see the middle of Figure 16.2), greater partner commitment and more behavioral accommodation by the partner assuaged the negative emotions and improved the behavioral reactions of anxiously attached individuals, yielding both greater felt security and more constructive emotions and behaviors.

Buffering Avoidance during Conflict

We have also investigated the behaviors that buffer avoidantly attached individuals. Overall, Simpson, and Struthers (2013), for example, videotaped romantic couples as they discussed relationship problems identified by one partner (the agent) who wanted change in the other partner (the target). Considering their strong need for autonomy and independence, being targeted for change should be particularly threatening to avoidantly attached individuals. As predicted, avoidant targets felt more anger and displayed more observer-rated withdrawal during these discussions, which resulted in less successful problem resolution. Some partners, however, were able to buffer avoidant defenses by "softening" their influence attempts. They did so by being sensitive to the target's autonomy needs, validating his or her viewpoint, and/or acknowledging his or her constructive efforts and positive attributes. Avoidant targets whose partners displayed more of these softening behaviors showed less anger and behavioral withdrawal, and their discussions were more productive and successful.

Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, and Oriña (2007) had romantic partners complete the Adult Attachment Interview, which measures attachment orientations to one's parents based on memories and interpretations of how one was treated as a child by one's parents. One week later, each couple was videotaped trying to resolve their most serious relationship problem. At peak distress points during each discussion (the triggering event in Figure 16.2), observers rated the extent to which (1) the less distressed partner (the agent) displayed emotional, instrumental, and/or physical caregiving behaviors, and (2) the distressed partner (the target) appeared to be calmed by his or her partner's caregiving attempts. Securely attached individuals were rated as more calmed when their partners gave them more emotional care by, for example, encouraging them to talk about their emotions/experiences associated with the problem or communicating strong emotional support. Because avoidantly attached individuals suppress their emotions and retract from emotional intimacy when they are upset, emotional caregiving should exacerbate their distress. As hypothesized, avoidant individuals were rated as more calmed when their partners gave them more instrumental caregiving, such as advice or suggestions on how to solve the problem, or discussing the problem in an intellectual/rational way. These results illustrate that in order to be effective, partners' buffering behaviors must be tailored to the specific needs, concerns, and defenses of insecure targets.

Most recently, Farrell, Simpson, Overall, and Shallcross (in press) examined how romantic couples fare during a specific kind of conflict situation—strain tests. In *strain tests*, one partner (the asker) requests cooperation with a very important personal plan or goal that he or she really wants to achieve, but one that requires the other partner (the responder) to make major personal sacrifices. Strain tests should be particularly difficult for avoidantly attached people when they are in the responding role (i.e., when they are being asked to make a major personal sacrifice) because doing so may reduce their autonomy and independence. Farrell and colleagues videotaped romantic couples having strain test discussions and assessed how avoidant individuals (responders) reacted when their romantic partners (askers) requested a major personal sacrifice of them. On average, highly avoidant responders had more negative relationship perceptions and behaved in a less accommodating manner when asked to make a major sacrifice. However, two behaviors enacted by asking partners—expressing confidence that the responding partner would facilitate the important plan/goal and acknowledging (giving credit for) the responding partner's likely sacrifices—led highly avoidant responders to react and behave more positively during these strain test discussions. The most likely reason for these buffering effects is that openly acknowledging and "giving credit" for the sacrifices that highly avoidant responders may have to make circumvents defensive reactions associated with the potential loss of autonomy and makes them feel as if their sacrifice will be manageable and appreciated. In addition, highly avoidant responders who received more of these buffering behaviors reported significant pre- to postdiscussion increases in trust in their partners, as well as increases in commitment to the partner and the relationship assessed 3 months later (see longer-term outcomes in Figure 16.2). Other generally positive behaviors, such as specifically expressing caring and affection during the discussion, did not buffer the negative responses of avoidant responders as well as acknowledgment of their sacrifices or expressions of confidence in their support did, providing further evidence for the need for tailored buffering.

Buffering Insecurity Following Conflict

We have also investigated what individuals do to buffer their insecure partners in the aftermath of conflict discussions. In a unique longitudinal study by Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, and Collins (2011), one partner in each couple had been studied since birth, so childhood attachment scores (rated in Ainsworth's Strange Situation; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) were available for these partners. Immediately after discussing and trying to resolve the major problem in their relationship, each couple did a "cool-down" discussion task, during which the partners talked about the most positive aspects of their relationship. Salvatore and colleagues assessed how quickly and completely each partner "recovered" from the prior conflict discussion. Insecurely attached individuals (rated as insecure as children 20 years earlier) had more difficulty recovering and were more inclined to "reengage" the conflict during the positive cool-down task. When their partners displayed better conflict recovery, however, insecure individuals reported feeling more positive about the relationship, and these couples were more likely to still be dating 2 years later. Hence, as depicted on the right side of Figure 16.2, partner buffering resulted in more beneficial, longer-term outcomes, including greater relationship stability over time.

In summary, these behavioral observation studies of romantic couples embroiled in conflict highlight the pivotal role that partner buffering assumes in protecting relationships that contain an insecurely attached partner. Attachment insecurity does not spell doom for insecure people or their relationships; partners who enact appropriately tailored behaviors can—and often do—buffer the typically negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions of their insecurely attached partners. It is important to emphasize, however, that partner buffering behaviors differ in effectiveness depending on how well they meet the underlying motives and reasons for a target's regulation difficulties. Even the "right kind" of buffering behaviors must be delivered skillfully, as we discuss in greater detail below. When buffering attempts repeatedly fail, agents may stop trying to console insecure targets, which is likely to exacerbate agents' dissatisfaction (Lemay & Dudley, 2011). But when partner buffering counteracts the worries and defenses of insecure people, persistent partner buffering ought to generate greater security in targeted partners across time. Partner buffering, in other words, may be a primary "agent of change" in fostering greater attachment security (Overall & Simpson, 2015).

Regulating Felt Insecurity in Everyday Life

Individuals can also attempt to regulate their partner's insecurities during daily exchanges. Lemay and Dudley (2011) propose that people learn about their partner's insecurities from the strong affective and behavioral reactions to threat commonly exhibited by highly anxious (as well as low self-esteem) partners. People also come to understand the many difficulties that such insecurities can generate in relationships, which may motive them to develop preemptive strategies to avoid upsetting their insecure partners in the first place. Besides attempting to short-circuit anger and hostility in threatening situations, individuals can also accomplish this goal by displaying strong and clear expressions of affection or concealing negative feelings and dissatisfaction with either their partner or their relationship.

Lemay and Dudley (2011) tested these ideas by asking friends to rate each other's level of security (i.e., each person's self-esteem and attachment anxiety) privately, then evaluate each other more globally (e.g., how much they valued their friend and were committed to the relationship). Some participants were then unexpectedly asked to provide their evaluations again but were told that, this time, their friend would see the information. When participants perceived that their friend was more insecure, they concealed their negative evaluations from him or her, and they offered more positive ratings when the information was public compared to the first set of ratings that was not seen by their friend. But when individuals perceived that their friend was more secure, there were no significant differences between their private and public ratings. In a follow-up diary study, Lemay and Dudley also found that exaggerated positive sentiments helped insecure partners feel more valued. Specifically, on days when individuals perceived that their partners felt more insecure (e.g., more negatively regarded or worried about the relationship), individuals were more concerned about upsetting their partners, more cautious of how they treated them, and more prone to exaggerate positive feelings and conceal negative feelings to them. This "affective exaggeration" in turn predicted *decreases* in their partner's insecurity on the following days.

Viewed together, these findings indicate that individuals often strive to avoid eliciting their partner's insecure defenses by camouflaging their unhappiness and accentuating their positive feelings about their partners and the relationship. This regulation strategy works well, in that insecure partners feel more valued and more highly regarded. However, this strategy can also backfire. Lemay and Clark (2008), for instance, found that insecure people are more inclined to believe that their partners express inauthentic or exaggerated expressions of regard at times, especially in response to their persistent reassurance seeking. Harboring doubts about the authenticity of expressed regard from their partners may also elevate their concerns about rejection, which could generate destructive reactions, such as derogating the partner. Thus, unless it is enacted well, insecure individuals may detect their partner's overcompensation efforts, which may further undermine their sense of security in the relationship.

On the flip side, continually censoring legitimate complaints, exaggerating affection, and trying not to ruffle hypersensitive partners—that is, "walking on eggshells"—may carry heavy costs for individuals involved with insecure partners. Having to provide constant reassurance and continually feeling the need to build up and reinforce the self-esteem of insecure partners ought to take a toll on even highly committed individuals, whose *own* needs may often be ignored or overlooked. Accordingly, Lemay and Dudley (2011) found that the more partners reported engaging in exaggerated affection, the less positively they viewed their relationship that day.

In conclusion, just as with the partner regulation processes displayed in Figure 16.1, the outcomes of the partner buffering processes shown in Figure 16.2 ought to differ depending on the agent of regulation (the person trying to regulate the insecurity of his or her partner) and the target of regulation (the insecure person receiving additional love and attention). Similar to partner regulation, the ultimate outcome of partner buffering for regulation agents rests largely on the responses of the targeted partner. In particular, the outcomes for both partners should be more favorable across time if buffering attempts increase the level of trust and self-esteem in insecurely attached individuals, resulting in more constructive and smooth interactions in which relationship conflicts are resolved more effectively. In this case, agents are also likely to experience boosts in relationship satisfaction (see the longer-term outcomes in Figure 16.2). If, however, buffering behaviors must be continually enacted by agents in response to the hypersensitivity of the targeted partner and regulating the partner's insecurity fails to work as intended, then agents' commitment may decline over time. Thus, similar to the partner regulation processes discussed earlier (see Figure 16.1), it is crucial that the specific strategies used by agents to buffer their partner's attachment insecurity effectively address the particular concerns of insecure targets, while also generating the relationship improvements that are needed to promote positive long-term outcomes for *both* partners.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by discussing a hypothetical relationship between Jake and Sarah. We did so to showcase some important but understudied processes that occur in nearly all relationships—the ways in which partners regulate one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Jake and Sarah, for example, attempted to resolve important issues in their relationship by trying to change the amount of attention each partner paid to career and finances versus intimacy and fun together. Although such partner regulation processes can improve relationships and resolve conflicts, they can also produce negative feelings and defensiveness, especially when partner regulation attempts are not sensitive to the targeted partner's feelings of regard and self-worth. This is especially true if targeted partners are like Jake and harbor chronic insecurities about whether their partners truly love and are committed to them.

As relationships develop, however, people such as Sarah learn about the insecurities of their partners and may frequently try to soothe and buffer their partner's concerns and vulnerabilities, particularly in threatening situations. Sarah's effective partner buffering eventually helped Jake manage his own emotions and behaviors more constructively, which resulted in more positive outcomes for Jake, Sarah, and their relationship. And once Jake developed a stronger sense of security, he had the confidence to change other aspects of himself and the relationship that caused difficulties in their relationship, which also helped improve aspects of the relationship that Sarah wanted to change. Over time, these joint dyadic regulation processes enhanced their relationship.

Partner regulation and buffering processes can also have some clear costs. By continually working to bolster Jake's self-esteem and security, Sarah may grow tired of being the constantly supportive partner, and she may come to realize that some of her own important needs are not being fulfilled. For example, because she needs to protect Jake's feelings of regard by adopting soft, positive regulation strategies when attempting to resolve relationship problems, Sarah's attempts to attain desired relationship improvements are likely to be a long, slow process. On the other hand, taking a more direct, blunt approach would produce more rapid and successful change and bolster her satisfaction, but it might seriously undermine Jake's perceptions of himself and their relationship. These complex benefits and costs highlight an important point: A complete understanding of how dyadic regulation processes function and affect relationships requires understanding and modeling the consequences of dyadic regulation for *both* agents and targets of regulation.

Adopting a dyadic perspective on regulation processes in close relationships introduces a vast array of interesting and important avenues for future research. Future work should continue to test the models we outline in this chapter, particularly the long-term outcomes for both partners resulting from dyadic regulation processes. Additionally, we know little about how targets of regulation perceive regulation and buffering attempts in the moment. Future research should examine how targets interpret their partners' behavior and how these perceptions might mediate the effectiveness of partner regulation and partner buffering. We hope that this chapter sparks new ideas and hypotheses at the intersection between self-regulation and partner regulation processes in close relationships.

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