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Emotion Regulation in Couples' Conflict Memories: A Dyadic Examination of Relationship Quality

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Although conflicts in a romantic relationship are known to impact its quality, how individuals keep emotionally regulating the memory of these conflicts could also be associated with both partners' relationship quality. The present study investigated whether the emotion regulation strategies used during recall of a couple conflict memory were differentially associated with the perceived relationship quality of both partners. A total of 218 participants (109 couples) reported their general emotion regulation strategies and perception of relationship quality. Each participant subsequently described a specific conflict memory within the relationship, and judges independently rated the intensity of the reported conflict. Participants also reported the emotion regulation strategy they still used when recalling the conflict. Emotion regulation strategies involved either actively engaging with negative emotions, accepting them, and deriving meaning from the experience (i.e., integrative emotion regulation) or difficulty in adequately managing the negative emotions when recalling the conflict, leading to an overwhelming experience (i.e., dysregulation). A multilevel model revealed that integrative regulation during retrieval of conflict memories was positively associated with self-perceived relationship quality. In contrast, dysregulation during retrieval of conflict memories was negatively associated with both partners' perceived relationship quality. Importantly, these results remained significant even after accounting for how people generally regulate their emotions in daily life, as well as the intensity of the conflict. Our findings suggest that the emotion regulation used when retrieving a conflict memory may modulate each partner's perceived relationship quality.

Keywords: emotion regulation, episodic memory, conflict, couple relationship, romantic relationship quality

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Imagine that you and your romantic partner are on vacation in Paris. Excited, you suggest visiting a museum, but your partner feels tired and declines, appearing uninterested. Feeling dismissed, you ignore him for the next hour. As days pass, the memory of this conflict resurfaces, especially when wanting to plan activities with him or when he seems tired. Each time, you wonder if his disinterest signals a more profound lack of enthusiasm for shared activities or for the relationship itself. Over time, these thoughts and reminiscences of this conflict could diminish the quality of your relationship. Moreover, your partner might notice changes in your behaviors toward him, which could also affect his perception of the relationship quality. Now imagine handling the same conflict

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Data are available upon reasonable request from Frederick L. Philippe, and this study was not preregistered. Preliminary findings from this study were presented as posters at the Annual Convention of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, San Diego, United States, February 2024, and at the Quebec Society for Research in Psychology, Sherbrooke, Canada, May 2023. Participants provided informed consent. This study followed the Tri-Council policy statement for ethical conduct for research involving humans and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Human Research Ethics Board of the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivieres (CER-18-250-07.09). The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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differently. Despite feeling dismissed, you acknowledge your emotions and wonder why your partner might be uninterested. This may lead you to empathize with your partner and reassess the conflict from his perspective. As time goes by, this interest and attentiveness to your emotions, as well as your partner's, will resurface whenever you recall the conflict. As a result, the conflict could enhance the relationship quality, as both of you may benefit from a more understanding and insightful attitude.

These examples present two ways of handling emotions during a romantic conflict and illustrate expressions of what are called emotion regulation strategies. Emotion regulation involves strategies that individuals employ to manage their emotions, including the type, timing, experience, and expression of these emotions (Gross, 1998). These strategies can lead to more or less adaptive outcomes and can exert disparate influences on relationship quality (Low et al., 2019; Vater & Schröder–Abé, 2015). Research suggests that emotion regulation strategies remain encoded in memory and can be reactivated upon recall (Houle & Philippe, 2020; Philippe, 2023). As a result, how conflicts are encoded in memory in terms of emotion regulation and later recalled may relate to relationship quality over time. The present study aimed to determine how the emotion regulation strategy used when retrieving a couple's conflict memory was related to the perceived relationship quality of both partners.

Relationship Quality and Emotion Regulation During Conflict

Romantic relationships are fundamental to human life and often represent our closest bonds (Berscheid et al., 1989). However, the quality of these relationships also matters, as it influences daily happiness and well-being (Caunt et al., 2013; Hudson et al., 2020) and mental health (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017). It is therefore important to understand factors that affect romantic relationship quality. Conflicts can seriously threaten the quality of romantic relationships (Woodin, 2011), although their impact often depends on how emotions are regulated (Ben-Naim et al., 2013; Ferguson & Karantzas, 2023; Frye et al., 2020; Low et al., 2019; Vater & Schröder–Abé, 2015). For instance, Ferguson and Karantzas (2023) analyzed couples' self-regulation strategies during videotaped discussions of a significant and unresolved conflict. Their results suggested that adaptive emotion self-regulation during conflicts was positively associated with both partners' relationship quality. Additionally, an experimental study by Ben-Naim et al. (2013) found that reappraisal—a mostly adaptive emotion regulation strategy—during romantic conflicts reduced cardiovascular arousal and increased positive affect for both partners. Although this study did not directly assess relationship quality, these affective and physiological processes have been linked in prior research to relationship quality (Meyer et al., 2015; Robles et al., 2014). Overall, these results suggest that emotion regulation during conflict may be critical for romantic relationship quality.

Emotion Regulation Strategies

Emotion regulation is a broad concept that includes various emotion strategies and actions. A meta-analytic factor analysis by Naragon-Gainey et al. (2017) on the structure of emotion regulation strategies identified three broad factors: disengagement (avoidance), aversive cognitive perseveration (dysregulation), and adaptive engagement (integrative regulation). Similarly, self-determination theory (SDT), which frames emotions as processed in terms of integration into the self, identified the same three broad strategies: avoidance, dysregulation, and integrative regulation (Roth et al., 2009, 2014, 2019; Ryan et al., 2015). In accordance with SDT, the present study focuses on two strategies, integrative regulation and dysregulation, which exemplify opposite ways of processing emotions: tolerance and acceptance versus a sense of overwhelming perseveration.

Integrative emotion regulation includes a range of strategies, such as acceptance, mindfulness, problem solving, and reappraisal (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). As theorized by SDT, this emotion regulation strategy is generally characterized by an open, nonjudgmental, and receptive attitude toward one's emotional experiences, which, in turn, fosters a deeper exploration and understanding of emotions in relation to oneself (Roth et al., 2018, 2019). By adopting integrative regulation, individuals are better equipped to make informed and volitional decisions regarding their emotional responses (Roth et al., 2019). Moreover, this strategy facilitates open and nonaggressive behaviors during interpersonal conflicts, allowing for more constructive interactions (Roth & Assor, 2012). Such an approach to emotions supports overall well-being and enables individuals to view conflicts as opportunities for learning and growth within their relationships (Benita et al., 2020). Consequently, when individuals employ integrative emotion regulation during conflicts, they are more likely to perceive these events as informative and to express their emotions in a flexible and adaptive manner (Roth et al., 2014, 2018, 2019). Such effects may persist beyond the conflict itself, influencing how individuals recall and interpret the conflict, thereby affecting the quality of their relationship.

Conversely, dysregulation encompasses strategies such as rumination and worry (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). Within SDT, this strategy results in an inability to manage intense and overwhelming emotions, leading to ineffective functioning and maladaptive emotional expression (i.e., impulsive screaming, rumination, or overworrying; Roth et al., 2014, 2019). Moreover, dysregulation is typically associated with subjective distress, ill-being, self-harm (Brenning et al., 2023), and low relationship quality for both partners (Bloch et al., 2014). During conflicts, individuals using dysregulation struggle to manage their emotions and are likely to resort to nonfunctional interpersonal behaviors, such as aggressive outbursts, sulking, withdrawal, uncontrolled crying, rumination, or even making impulsive decisions (Roth & Assor, 2012; Roth et al., 2009; Vater & Schröder–Abé, 2015). These behaviors could generate different partner reactions, such as feeling unsafe or unloved, yelling back, or attempting to reassure their partner. Therefore, an integrative or a dysregulation strategy during a conflict may relate differently to romantic relationship quality. However, no study has examined how partners regulate their emotions when recalling a past conflict or how this relates to relationship quality.

Memory of Conflict and Emotion Regulation

It is important to recognize that the impact of a conflict extends beyond the event itself, as individuals encode the conflict in memory. As such, memories of past conflicts can be reactivated by external cues or deliberate recall, affecting partners even when they are not actively discussing the conflict or facing a similar one. Memory research has shown that romantic relationship memories can significantly influence relationship quality, demonstrating a directive effect of memory on relationship outcomes (Philippe et al., 2013;

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Wolf & Nusser, 2024). Alea and Vick (2010) found that a more positive, vivid, and emotionally intense memory of the first encounter with a spouse was positively associated with marital satisfaction. Additionally, romantic memories characterized by greater need satisfaction have been associated with increases in relationship quality over a year, lower breakup rates, and higher commitment for both partners (Guilbault & Philippe, 2017; Philippe et al., 2013). However, the specific associations between conflict memories and relationship quality have never been investigated.

Memories are encoded not only with the details of the event itself but also with the emotion regulation processes through which the event was interpreted (Conway, 2009; Philippe et al., 2011). Consequently, when a conflict memory is later activated, the emotion regulation tendencies embedded in that memory are likely to be re-instantiated, shaping the person's current attitudes and behaviors (Philippe, 2023). Furthermore, emotion regulation patterns encoded within a conflict may differ from those typically employed, as emotion regulation varies by context (Aldao, 2014; Starr & Moulds, 2006). Consequently, even if someone typically employs integrative emotion regulation, dysregulation experienced during the recall of a romantic conflict memory could harm both partners' relationship quality. This is because the person will likely revert to dysregulation strategies such as rumination and worry each time the conflict memory is reactivated, thereby affecting this person's perceptions of the relationship quality over time. In turn, this person's frequent ruminative and worried behaviors could degrade their partner's perception of the relationship quality.

To our knowledge, no study has explored the associations between emotion regulation strategies used when recalling a past memory of conflict and romantic relationship quality. Understanding these dynamics could reveal a cognitive mechanism that explains how couples remain shaped by their memories of past conflicts.

Although our primary focus was on the associations between emotion regulation during recall of conflict memories and romantic relationship quality, reverse associations are also theoretically plausible, consistent with past research on romantic relationship perceptions (Johnson et al., 2018). Because memories are reconstructed each time they are recalled (Conway et al., 2004; McAdams, 2001; Singer & Salovey, 1993), relationship quality may also relate to how conflicts are represented in memory, exemplifying a reconstructive effect of relationship outcomes on memories. For instance, individuals in more satisfying relationships may be more likely to reconsolidate conflict memories with greater integrative regulation.

Potential Avenues for Practitioners

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study might have important implications for couple practitioners. If the emotion regulation used when recalling a particular conflict relates to both partners' relationship quality, practitioners could invite partners to revisit not only recent but also more distant conflict memories and support them in reflecting on and making sense of the emotions these memories elicit. This process may facilitate integrative emotion regulation and help individuals articulate their emotional experiences, potentially benefiting both partners.

The Present Study

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine how the emotion regulation strategies used when retrieving a couple's conflict memory are related to both partners' perceived relationship quality. The second purpose was to ascertain that this association was specific to the emotion regulation employed when recalling the conflict memory and could not be ascribed to emotion regulation strategies used in general or the intensity of the conflicts described. In line with memory directive processes, we hypothesized that dysregulation during recall of conflict memories would be negatively associated with the perceived relationship quality of both partners, whereas integrative emotion regulation during recall would be positively associated with the perceived relationship quality of both partners. Only the memory directive process model can predict partner effects (e.g., Guilbault & Philippe, 2017). Moreover, we expected these results to remain significant after controlling for both conflict intensity and individuals' general emotion regulation tendencies, as measured by a dispositional instrument. This approach allowed us to isolate the unique contribution of emotion regulation within the recalled conflict memory.

In addition to the primary hypotheses, we tested a memory reconstructive process model, examining whether both partners' relationship quality would be associated with emotion regulation during recall of the conflict memories, controlling for the same variables as described in the second purpose. We hypothesized that self-perceived relationship quality would be positively associated with integrative emotion regulation during recall of conflict memories and negatively with dysregulation during recall of conflict memories. However, we did not expect partner effects in the memory reconstructive model, as individuals' perceptions of relationship quality are unlikely to relate to how their partners reconstruct conflict memories, independently of the partners' own relationship perceptions.

Method

Transparency and Openness

All information regarding our sample size determination, measures, data exclusions, and any manipulations is reported in the Method section. Data and analysis codes are available from the corresponding author upon request. This study was not preregistered.

Participants

Recruitment was conducted with the survey firm BIP Research, which distributed an invitation to its panel of potential participants. The study was described as focusing on eating behaviors, goals, emotions, and romantic relationships. The study included two phases: completion of a questionnaire and completion of dietary recalls, the latter of which was unrelated to the present study. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to provide their partner's email address so that their partner could also be invited to participate. Inclusion criteria were being over 18 years old, being francophone, residing in Quebec, Canada, and being involved in a relationship for at least 6 months. This threshold ensured that participants had experienced a romantic conflict at least 3 months before data collection. Both partners individually completed an online questionnaire. In Quebec, only 57% of couples living together are married, compared to common-law unions (43%; Statistics Canada, 2022). Couples who are not married are still considered a family unit if they cohabit for a year or have a child.

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The initial convenience sample of 150 romantic couples was reduced to a final sample of 109 (105 different-sex, four same-sex) after excluding 41 couples who did not report a conflict memory. Most couples reported living together (89.9%), 44% were married, and the mean participant age was 52.8 years (range = 22–81 years, *SD* = 14.6). Educational attainment was high: 49% reported having a bachelor's degree or higher. Among the remainder, 31% had a professional degree or completed their college education, 12% had a high school diploma, and 7% completed primary education or did not specify their education level. First language was French (90%), followed by English (2%) and other languages (7%). Participants were primarily White (95%), and the remaining 5% included Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern individuals.

Power estimation using a Monte Carlo simulation (1,000 repetitions) in Mplus indicated that a sample of 109 couples allowed us to detect the effects of $\beta_{Actor/Partner} = .25$ with a power of .85 ($\alpha = .05$) within an actor–partner interdependence model.

Procedure

Participants first reported the duration of their relationship and completed scales on general emotion regulation and perceived relationship quality. Then, they described a couple conflict memory and indicated how they still emotionally regulate the memory when recalling it. This order was used to avoid a priming effect of the conflict memory on the subsequent scales (see Philippe et al., 2015). Each couple received $50 CAD for study completion. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Human Research Ethics Board of the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivieres.

Measures

Scores for each measurement scale were averaged, and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Dispositional Emotion Regulation

The Emotion Regulation Inventory (Roth et al., 2009, 2014) was used to measure the regulation of negative emotions in general. This scale includes 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Two subscales were used in this study: dysregulation (six items) and integrative regulation (seven items). Sample items are "When I feel negative emotions, I can't concentrate on other things I have to do" (dysregulation) and "On occasions, feeling negative emotions helped me to understand something about the situation I was in" (integrative regulation). The Emotion Regulation Inventory has good construct validity, as shown in the factor analysis by Roth et al. (2009), which identified three factors, all with eigenvalues higher than one (ranging from 2.30 to 3.30). These three factors explained 61% of the total variance, indicating good construct validity. In the present study, the omegas for integrative regulation and dysregulation were .83 and .82, respectively.

Perceived Relationship Quality

The short version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components (Fletcher et al., 2000b) was used to assess each partner's perception of relationship quality. This seven-item scale used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very strongly*) to measure seven dimensions of relationship quality: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance (the romance dimension was added in the Perceived Relationship Quality Components expansion; see Fletcher et al., 2000a). The short version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components has adequate internal consistency (for this data set, $\omega = .89$). Construct validity for all seven subscales was supported by a confirmatory factor analysis conducted by Fletcher et al. (2000a), which yielded adequate fit indices. Additionally, all subscales were tested in other studies, revealing good internal and test–retest reliabilities (for more details, see Fletcher et al., 2000b).

Couple Conflict Memory

Participants were asked to describe "a personal memory of a specific event or moment of significant conflict that you experienced with your romantic partner." Participants self-reported the conflict, meaning that partners could report the same conflict or two different conflicts. Following the instructions from Guilbault and Philippe (2017) and Philippe et al. (2013), participants were guided to select a memory of a specific romantic conflict that frequently and spontaneously comes to mind. These specific instructions were drawn from past memory research, which suggests that frequently activated memories are typically highly personally significant for participants (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Sutin & Robins, 2005). To mitigate potential recency effects, participants were also instructed to retrieve a memory that was at least 3 months old, thereby ensuring personal significance over temporal proximity. Participants were encouraged to describe the event, including what happened, who was present,

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship duration	22.42	14.37	—						
2. Relationship quality	5.47	0.99	−.031	—					
3. Integrative regulation in general	5.02	0.99	−.18*	.055	—				
4. Dysregulation in general	3.62	1.20	−.18*	−.16*	.13*	—			
5. Integrative regulation of the conflict memory	4.60	1.39	−.039	.15*	.22*	.021	—		
6. Dysregulation of the conflict memory	3.05	1.53	−.005	−.29*	.009	.35*	−.11	—	
7. Intensity of the conflict memory	2.94	0.77	−.19*	−.085	.25*	.067	.16	.13	—

Note. $N = 218$ participants (109 dyads).
* $p < .05$.

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and everyone's behaviors. The specific instructions can be found in the Supplemental Material.

A thematic analysis of the reported conflicts revealed three categories: (1) intimacy and sexuality; (2) needs, values, and interpersonal differences; and (3) practical conflicts. The categories were developed by the first author, who reviewed all memories to identify specific themes and reorganized them into three broader categories. Two independent coders were trained using 20% of the material and discussed discrepancies before rating the rest of the memories. Interjudge reliability was adequate for the remaining memories ($\kappa = .74$–$.89$). Most conflicts were categorized as practical conflicts (44.9%), such as disagreements about shared finances or food. These were followed by conflicts related to needs, values, and interpersonal differences (41.3%), including issues about child-rearing or unmet needs within the relationship. Finally, a smaller proportion involved intimacy and sexuality (13.8%), such as jealousy or infidelity.

Intensity of Conflict Memories

Two independent judges coded conflict intensity in each participant's memory narrative using a scale ranging from 1 (*low intensity*) to 5 (*high intensity*). Specifically, ratings were based on three criteria: (1) the emotional intensity described in the memory; (2) the degree of conflict escalation, including how the conflict was handled and whether it developed into an open argument; and (3) the perceived impact on the couple, such as the extent to which the conflict may potentially lead to a breakup. Judges were blind to all other study measures. For training, 20% of the memories were used, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Adequate interjudge reliability was found for the remaining memories (random intraclass correlation of .78). Final scores were obtained by averaging the ratings of both judges.

Emotion Regulation of the Conflict Memory

After describing a couple's conflict memory, participants were asked, "Now we would like to know how the event you remembered makes you feel when you think about it today." To assess the emotion regulation strategies used when recalling the memory of conflict, an adaptation of the Emotion Regulation scale (Roth et al., 2009) developed by Philippe et al. (2024) was used. Two strategies, dysregulation and integrative regulation, were assessed with two items each on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items are "I feel an overflow of emotion that is difficult to control" (dysregulation) and "This experience has made me grow" (integrative regulation). The emotion regulation in memory scale (Philippe et al., 2024) has good factorial validity and reliability indices. In this study, adequate intercorrelations were found between the two items of integrative regulation, $r(210) = .63$, $p < .001$, and dysregulation, $r(210) = .59$, $p < .001$.

Statistical Analysis

The primary analysis used the actor–partner interdependence model (Kenny et al., 2020) to examine variables' associations using dyadic data. Two types of associations were calculated: the association between each participant's scores on the measures of emotion regulation of the conflict memory and (1) their own score on relationship quality (actor effect) and (2) their partner's relationship quality score (partner effect). Most dyads in this study were different-sex couples (105 out of 109), which were used to test the distinguishability of the dyad members. To determine whether dyadic members were distinguishable, two phantom variables were created to estimate the k parameter using Mplus (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010). The analysis revealed that our sample was indistinguishable ($k = 0$; for more information, see the Supplemental Material). Therefore, a multilevel model was conducted on all dyads (different-sex and same-sex couples) using Mplus. We examined the actor and partner effects of the emotion regulation used when retrieving conflict memories on perceived relationship quality, controlling for each partner's general emotion regulation (Roth et al., 2019), relationship duration (Falconier et al., 2015), and conflict intensity of both partners. Moreover, we conducted a complementary multilevel model to examine the reverse associations, that is, the actor and partner effects of perceived relationship quality on emotion regulation used when retrieving conflict memories, controlling for the same variables as in the primary analyses.

Missing data represented 6% of all variables in the model and were handled using expectation-maximization imputation in SPSS. Full information maximum likelihood was not used to account for missing values because Mplus excludes cases with missing values at the between-level or on observed independent variables in multilevel model.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Correlations across partners revealed that integrative regulation in general was negatively associated with relationship duration and unrelated to relationship quality, whereas dysregulation in general was negatively associated with both (see Table 1). Integrative regulation in general was only weakly associated with integrative regulation during recall of the memory, whereas dysregulation in general was moderately associated with dysregulation during recall of the memory. These latter results suggest that the way people regulated a specific past conflict when recalling it may differ significantly from how they typically regulate their emotions in everyday life. Integrative regulation and dysregulation during recall of the memory were unrelated to relationship duration but positively and negatively associated with relationship quality, respectively. Furthermore, conflict intensity was negatively associated with relationship duration and positively associated with integrative regulation in general. However, conflict intensity was unrelated to integrative regulation and dysregulation during recall of the memory, as well as relationship quality. This suggests that conflict intensity may not play a central role in the emotion regulation strategy employed when retrieving these memories or in relationship quality in this study.

Directive Effect of Emotion Regulation in Conflict Memories on Relationship Quality

Before conducting the actor–partner interdependence model, an intraclass correlation coefficient was computed to assess the interdependence between dyad members. The intraclass correlation coefficient was statistically significant (intraclass correlation coefficient = .60, $p < .001$), indicating that 60% of the variance in relationship quality was attributed to the dyads. Results from the

multilevel model ($R^2 = .35$), controlling for general emotion regulation, relationship duration, and conflict intensity, are depicted in Figure 1, including its nonsignificant relations to all control variables. A significant positive actor effect was observed for integrative regulation used when retrieving the conflict memory on relationship quality. No partner effect was found for integrative regulation used when retrieving the conflict memory on relationship quality. Additionally, statistically significant negative actor and partner effects were found for dysregulation used when retrieving the conflict memory on relationship quality, indicating that dysregulation experienced when recalling a conflict memory was negatively linked to the relationship quality of both dyad members. There were no actor or partner effects of conflict intensity, relationship duration, or dispositional integrative regulation and dispositional dysregulation.

Reconstructive Effect of Relationship Quality on Emotion Regulation in Conflict Memories

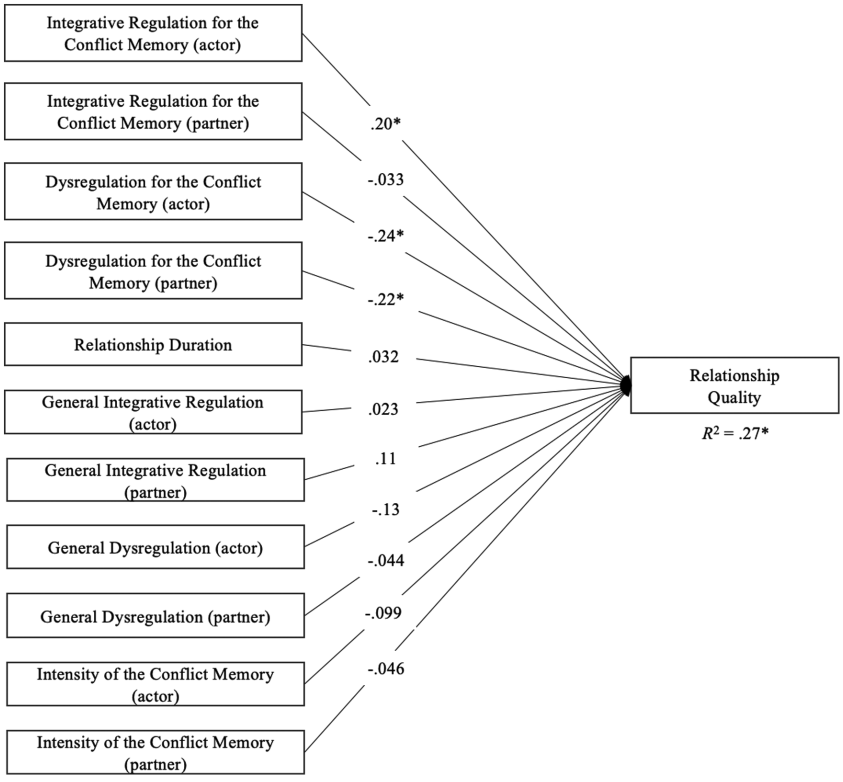
The reconstructive model examined the associations between relationship quality and integrative regulation ($R^2 = .12$) and dysregulation ($R^2 = .24$) as experienced when recalling conflict memories (see Figure 2). Significant positive actor effects were observed for dispositional integrative regulation, conflict intensity, and relationship quality on integrative regulation during recall of conflict memories. Results also showed a significant positive actor effect of dispositional dysregulation and a negative actor effect of relationship quality on dysregulation during recall of conflict memories. No partner effects were significant for either form of emotion regulation during recall of the conflict memory. These results indicate that self-perceived relationship quality relates to the way individuals emotionally regulate their conflict memories when retrieving them. However, partners' relationship quality does not seem to be linked to the way their partner emotionally regulates their conflict memories upon recall.

General Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate whether the directive effect of emotion regulation used when retrieving past romantic conflict memories would be associated with both partners' relationship quality. The results indicated that integrative emotion regulation during recall of a conflict memory was positively associated

Figure 1

Directive Effect Model: Emotion Regulation in Couple Conflict Memories on Perceived Relationship Quality (Standardized Model Results)



Note. $N = 218$ participants (109 dyads).
* $p < .05$.

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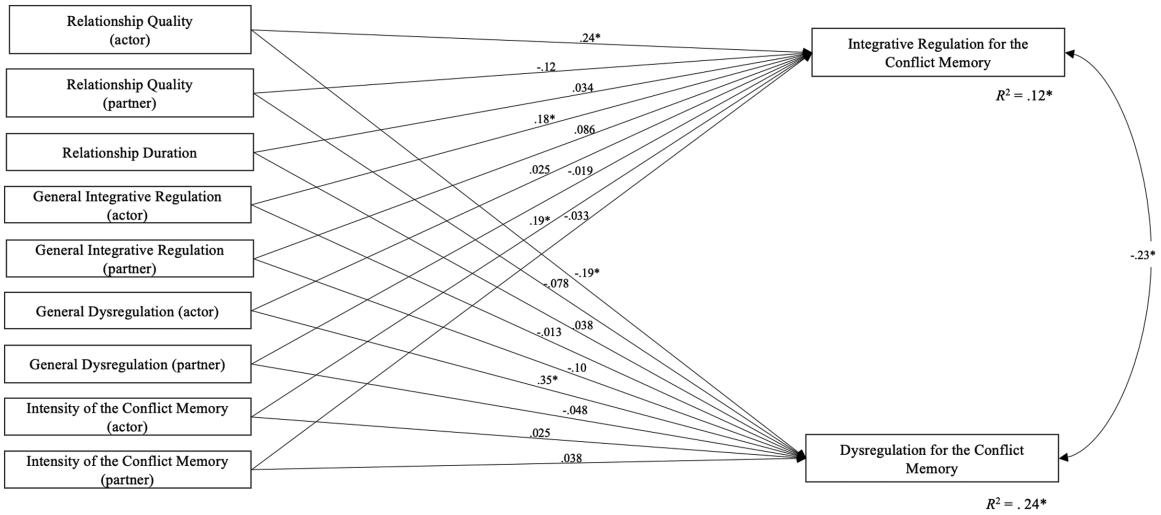
Figure 2

Reconstructive Effect Model: Perceived Relationship Quality on Emotion Regulation in Couple Conflict Memories (Standardized Model Results)



Note. $N = 218$ participants (109 dyads).
* $p < .05$.

with self-perceived relationship quality, whereas dysregulation during recall was negatively linked to the relationship quality of both partners. The second purpose was to verify that these associations were not due to dispositional emotion regulation capacities or conflict intensity. This latter hypothesis was supported, as the results remained unchanged after controlling for dispositional emotion regulation strategies and conflict intensity. Strikingly, dispositional emotion regulation and conflict intensity were not associated with relationship quality. Thus, the way a specific conflict memory was still emotionally regulated to this day was more strongly associated with relationship quality than the way each partner was regulating their emotions in general in their lives or the intensity of the original conflict. The reconstructive effect model was also examined to test whether relationship quality was associated with emotion regulation during recall of conflict memories. Results from this complementary analysis revealed only actor effects, such that self-perceived relationship quality was associated with integrative regulation and dysregulation used during recall of conflict memories. All partner effects were nonsignificant. Overall, results suggest that the way specific conflict memories are remembered, in terms of their emotion regulation characteristics, has significant associations with relationship quality for both partners and that perceived relationship quality was only related to individuals' own emotion regulation processes in conflict memories. These results should be interpreted with caution, however, as the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences or conclusions about the direction of the relationship.

Emotion Regulation: Why Context Matters

Research on the impact of emotion regulation strategies on relationship quality has yielded mixed results (Frye et al., 2020; Rick et al., 2017). One possible explanation for these inconsistencies is that many studies assess emotion regulation at the general level rather than within a specific context, such as in situ interactions or memory-based studies (Aldao, 2014; Gross, 1998; Rick et al., 2017; Starr & Moulds, 2006). For instance, past in situ studies have consistently reported both actor and partner effects of emotion regulation during conflict discussions on marital satisfaction and family functioning, in both longitudinal and correlational designs (Bloch et al., 2014; Ferguson & Karantzas, 2023; Low et al., 2019; Vater & Schröder–Abé, 2015). These effects have been observed for both integrative emotion regulation and dysregulation. However, although both in situ and the current memory-based study examine emotion regulation in relation to a specific conflict, they differ in the timing of assessment. In situ studies investigate emotion regulation during an ongoing interaction, whereas this memory-based study investigates how conflicts are experienced, encoded, and later reactivated in memory. Consequently, their findings cannot be directly compared. Nonetheless, the fact that emotion regulation is assessed with respect to a specific conflict rather than at a general level in both types of studies may partly account for the significant findings of the present research.

By assessing conflict as memories, the present study offers a novel perspective on emotion regulation processes in couple conflicts. Memory research has shown that conflict experiences are encoded in memory, along with several sensory components. Emotion regulation is encoded, as well as emotional, cognitive, and motor components in event memories (Conway, 2009; Rubin, 2006). Nonetheless, these regulatory processes may evolve over time through self-reflection, postconflict discussions between partners, or even experimental interventions targeting emotion regulation during conflict interactions (Bodenmann, 2005; Holland & Kensinger, 2013). Consequently, our results may not only reflect the original conflict experience but also subsequent reconstructions and regulatory adjustments.

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However, if a conflict memory remains characterized by dysregulation or integrative regulation over time (conflict occurred at least 3 months prior to the study), recalling the memory or encountering external cues related to it may reinstate the emotion regulation tendencies still embedded in that memory. This reinstatement can then have a directive function in shaping individuals' current attitudes and behaviors (Philippe, 2023) and, depending on the regulation pattern involved, may generate positive or negative feedback loops that influence both partners' relationship quality.

In the case of dysregulation, when a conflict memory is reactivated, it may prompt the renewed use of dysregulated strategies, such as rumination, withdrawal, or hostile expression, potentially creating other dysregulated event memories. Consequently, a dysregulated conflict memory may function as a repetitive and rigid pattern of emotion regulation, which is triggered only by situational cues resembling features of the original conflict memory, such as a cognitive–affective unit (see Mischel & Shoda, 1995). This rigidity reflects a lack of flexibility in emotion regulation processes, which is generally considered maladaptive (Aldao, 2014; Schäfer et al., 2017). Consistent with this interpretation, our results showed that dysregulation during recall of conflict memories was negatively associated with self-perceived relationship quality, as well as their partner's. Moreover, our results showed that these associations persisted beyond the intensity of the conflict, suggesting that the way an event is regulated during retrieval, in terms of dysregulation, may play a more important role in relationship quality than the intensity of the original conflict, as suggested in previous research (see van der Kaap–Deeder et al., 2016).

In terms of integrative regulation, our findings showed that while dispositional integrative emotion regulation of both partners was unrelated to relationship quality, integrative emotion regulation during recall of conflict memories was positively associated with self-perceived relationship quality. This finding is particularly important, as it shows that the way a conflict is regulated can be associated with higher relationship quality. Individuals may naturally or with therapeutic help evolve toward a more integrative regulation of their couple conflicts. For instance, a conflict initially characterized by dysregulation—such as disagreements about a life-threatening illness and treatment decisions—may, after self-reflection or discussions between partners, be reinterpreted in a more integrative way. This would allow the person to understand their partner's perspective and integrate this conflict into their self-understanding (e.g., "I do not want my partner to suffer"). In this way, integrative regulation may occur even when the original conflict was distressing, reflecting the integration of the conflict into the self (Roth et al., 2019).

One of our hypotheses regarding integrative regulation was not supported, which contradicted previous studies (e.g., Ferguson & Karantzas, 2023). Specifically, it was found that integrative regulation during recall of a conflict memory was not associated with partners' perceived relationship quality. One possible explanation is that our model controlled for dysregulation, and the negative associations of a dysregulated memory of conflict are more salient to the other partner than the positive associations of an integrated memory of conflict. Research on romantic relationship behaviors supports this explanation, indicating that negative relationship behaviors have a greater influence on relationship functioning and satisfaction than positive behaviors (Rivers & Sanford, 2018). Moreover, integrative regulation is an internal process that might not be visible to the partner, in contrast to dysregulation, which leads to more visible maladaptive behaviors (i.e., sulking, yelling). This could explain why the present study did not find a significant association between integrative regulation of conflict memories and the other partner's relationship quality after controlling for dysregulation and why it found stronger associations for dysregulation. The interpretations proposed across these three sets of findings remain tentative, and longitudinal research would be needed to validate them.

A significant number of participants (27.33%) did not report a conflict memory that occurred more than 3 months ago, which may be explained by several factors, including insufficient commitment to the study, the absence of a conflict in the relationship, or the suppression or omission of conflict memories. Another possibility is that some conflicts were simply not salient enough to the couple and therefore receded from memory over time—a process that may be particularly common among highly satisfied couples. However, our cross-sectional design does not allow us to adjudicate between these explanations. Futures studies could investigate the possibility that emotion regulation of conflict memories may be more relevant when the conflict remains salient over time.

The Reconstructive Model

Research suggests that self-beliefs, such as relational schemas, shape how specific experiences are interpreted and reconstructed (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Consistent with this view, our results showed that relationship quality was associated with individuals' emotion regulation processes when recalling conflict memories. However, as expected from this perspective, relationship quality was not related to the partners' emotion regulation during recall of conflict memories, after considering partners' own self-perceived relationship quality. Indeed, such a result would be very improbable, as it suggests that one partner's high relationship quality may foster more integrative emotion regulation in how a conflict is reconstructed by the other partner, regardless of the other partner's own perceived relationship quality. The absence of significant partner effects in the reconstructive model supports the implausibility of this effect. Nonetheless, the observed partner effects of dysregulation in the directive model suggest that it may be possible to disentangle directive and reconstructive processes, even in a cross-sectional design, although longitudinal data would be needed to confirm this.

Clinical Implications

Interventions that would target a single conflict characterized by dysregulation during retrieval, to interrupt the negative feedback loop, might be fruitful. One potential intervention involves recalling the conflict memory and associating it with new information through a process known as memory reconsolidation (Ecker & Vaz, 2022; Hupbach et al., 2007). Reconsolidation can change the emotion regulation strategies encoded within a memory. For instance, one study found that when remembering an emotionally negative event, individuals can be instructed to use alternative regulation strategies, such as reappraisal, thereby reconsolidating the memory with reappraisal (Holland & Kensinger, 2013). From an SDT perspective, the aim of modifying emotion regulation within a conflict memory is to help partners integrate the information conveyed by emotions (e.g., needs, values) and translate this understanding into constructive actions (Roth et al., 2019). For example, recalling a conflict

involving lying about pornography use may trigger dysregulated emotions such as feelings of sexual inadequacy or doubts about a partner's commitment. Intervention could help partners identify the needs and values involved in the conflict and develop a better understanding of themselves and their partner, thereby fostering a more integrative processing of the conflict. This may have important clinical implications, as transforming a single dysregulated conflict memory into an integrative one could potentially diminish its negative consequences for both partners' relationship quality. Indeed, several studies have highlighted the spillover effect of dysregulation, indicating that its effects on relationships extend beyond the one-time conflict, adversely affecting long-term relationship satisfaction and family functioning (Low et al., 2019; Vater & Schröder–Abé, 2015). The present study highlights one potential mechanism underlying this spillover effect, suggesting that the frequent recall of a conflict characterized by dysregulation may be relevant to this process. Future research is necessary to support those claims and develop potential interventions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had limitations. First, the sample was not representative in terms of couple composition (only four same-sex couples) and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, itconsisted primarily of long-term, highly satisfied couples, with an average relationship duration of 22 years and a mean relationship quality score of 5.5 out of 7. These results may not be generalizable to samples of same-sex couples, younger couples, ethnically diverse couples, or clinical populations. Further research should replicate our findings with a more diverse sample. Second, controlled regulation (suppression) in memories of conflict, the timing of the conflict, and the perceived resolution of the conflict were not assessed in this study. Future research should examine how temporal distance from the conflict shapes emotion regulation processes using a longitudinal design and explore mediation or moderation effects at play during the reconsolidation process. Future studies could also assess perceived conflict resolution and emotion regulation in conflict memories to better disentangle these processes, as well as examine the effects of controlled regulation in conflict memories. Third, due to the study's design, no causal relationships can be established. However, since we found significant associations, future studies could explore causal relationships by manipulating the implicit activation of dysregulated and integrative conflict memories (see Philippe & Bernard-Desrosiers, 2017). Fourth, this study included only a single time-point measurement, preventing the exploration of long-term effects or the direction of these effects over time. A longitudinal study would be valuable to examine how dysregulation or integrative emotion regulation in conflict memories affects romantic relationship quality over time. Finally, future research could examine emotion regulation in other shared negative memories (e.g., stressful life events) or in personal negative memories to determine whether the present findings generalize beyond the context of couples' conflict.

Conclusion

Overall, this research highlights a new finding: the importance of investigating emotion regulation processes used during recall of conflict memories for relationship quality. The results expand existing findings on the role of memories in relationship functioning by opening a new avenue of research focusing on emotion regulation, as encoded in past experiences. These findings may also have practical implications, suggesting that practitioners could help individuals integrate their past romantic conflicts by focusing on memories of specific conflicts, which could potentially improve relationship quality for both partners. Future research in this area appears promising for better understanding the cognitive mechanisms through which conflicts impact romantic relationship quality.

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