

Research Reports

Couples' Relationship Self-Regulation Narratives After Intervention

Vilija Girgždė*^a, Viktoras Keturakis^b, Jolanta Sondaitė^a

[a] Institute of Psychology, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania. [b] Department of General and Educational Psychology, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Abstract

Relationship self-regulation is a way for couples to work on their relationships by becoming reflective about them, by setting goals for improvement, and by following up with efforts to be a better partner. Reflection is an important process in relationship self-regulation addressed in this study. The aim of this study is to analyse relationship self-regulation narratives after a relationship education intervention. Ten married partners (age 33-43 years) participated in a four-day reflective experiential relationship education programme intervention. The study investigated couples' experiences of working on their relationship after the intervention. Two focus groups were conducted and narrative analysis was used. Four common themes emerged: becoming aware of one's inner reactions and re-appraisals, learning to be sensitive, noticing one's own habitual responses and making choice, and experimenting in the relationship. These themes are discussed by applying a couple relationship self-regulation conceptual framework. We revealed that relationship self-regulation emerged as a process of regulation of intrapersonal emotional reactions to partner. Reflectivity in relationship self-regulation may be defined as focusing on oneself, trying to understand one's own feelings and needs, experimenting to meet these needs, and exploring resources. The research focuses on the study of meaning making and on the reflection processes of partners in couple relationship self-regulation.

Keywords: couple relationship education, intervention for couples, narratives, relationship self-regulation

Europe's Journal of Psychology, 2014, Vol. 10(2), 336–351, doi:10.5964/ejop.v10i2.643

Received: 2013-06-11. Accepted: 2014-04-25. Published (VoR): 2014-05-28.

Handling Editor: Vlad Glăveanu, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

*Corresponding author at: Institute of Psychology, Mykolas Romeris University, Ateities g. 20, LT-08303 Vilnius, Lithuania. E-mail: vilija@porukonsultavimas.lt



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

Couple Relationship Education

Couples improve their relationships when they work on their relationships. The meta-narrative¹ of working to improve a relationship has been produced by Western culture and has been studied extensively (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994; Meyer, Larson, Busby, & Harper, 2012). Naturally, partners have relationship enrichment activities that are novel, challenging, evoking and that do not require any professional intervention (Roberts & Greenberg, 2002). Partners also use various strategies to improve their relationship. They do this on their own, or they also look for support and services from professionals. After an intervention they are often left to continue on working on their relationships with their own efforts, competencies, and skills. There is a lack of studies that shed light on what processes are involved when couples return to their everyday lives after an intervention (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). The gap of follow-up research after couples intervention leaves us in the unknown as to how couples use the knowledge and skills they acquired during intervention.

Couple relationship education is a service widely used by married and committed cohabiting couples (Meyer et al., 2012). There are different traditions of couple relationship education in each country (Halford & Simons, 2005) and different names, too (Larson, 2007). Couple relationship education aims to provide couples with knowledge, skills, experience, and attitude (Halford, 2011) that they may use in working on their relationships and increasing their quality of life as a couple.

Larson (2007) described three approaches to relationship education programs:

1. "Time-limited and structured relationship education such as inventories in which a facilitator systematically teaches relationship principles with participant involvement;
2. Semi-structured discussion and support groups that are less time-limited and encourage active participation by couples; and
3. Insight and skills-focused programs." (Larson, 2007, p. 200).

Many studies on couple relationship education have been conducted to provide evidence about the impact and quality of counselling services (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Several couple relationship education studies aimed to answer questions about outcomes, factors, and potential usefulness of educational programs (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Petch, Halford, Creedy, & Gamble, 2012; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006) and also to try to understand universal processes and common factors across couple interventions (Halford & Snyder, 2012). According to Halford (2011), many evidence-based couple relationship education programs were evaluated using inventories. The weakness of using inventories is that the usefulness of the programme is predefined by the questions of the research method, which narrows couples' long-term feedback. Parker (2005) acknowledges that well-designed studies that are grounded in scientific principles are difficult to apply in a service environment. It is important to not only demonstrate that relationship education is effective but also to understand how these programs help couples work on their relationships. There is a need to understand what couples take in long run as a resource out for intervention to sustain in healthy committed relationship.

Relationship Self-Regulation

Self regulation is broadly understood as the set of psychological processes through which people bring their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in line with abstract standards, goals, or values (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). Self-regulation is used interchangeably or implies the term "self control" which is not the same as that mentioned by Baumeister and Stillman (2008). Alignment of the self with a preferred state consistent with one's own standards and values differs from controlling one's own impulses. The former embraces the complexity of personality processes and includes the latter.

The idea of self-regulation has been applied in education, drug treatment, performance and emotion control. The research has shown that individuals use self-regulatory resources sparingly and strategically and experience efficient social interactions (Finkel et al., 2006). Self-regulating individuals who can persist through obstacles are more successful in their careers. They experience more life satisfaction and well-being (Vohs & Baumeister, 2011).

The majority of models describe self-regulation as a private (Koole et al., 2006), intrapersonal process. The other line of theorising is to study self-regulation socially contextualised and interdependent with social factors such as interpersonal relationships. Baumeister and Stillman (2008) have shown a bidirectional relationship between self-control and close relationships. Self-control benefits or sometimes harms close relationships and, vice versa, close relationship benefit self-control. Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994) applied self-regulation theory to

couple relationships and proposed the term couple relationship self-regulation. There are studies that have attempted to measure relationship self-regulation (Gredler & Schwartz, 1997), and dyadic self-regulation in couples (Butner, Diamond, & Hicks, 2007; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2012; Schoebi, 2008; Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005). The relationship self-change (termed as relationship self-regulation) is conceptualised as a common pathway for couple relationship education and relationship satisfaction, and as a mediator for change (Halford, 2011). Relationship self-change (relationship self-regulation) is assumed to occur in at least two different ways: by engaging in a couple relationship education project and by becoming reflective or by monitoring one's own behaviour, or by specifically targeted and taught relationship self-regulation competences (Halford, 2011) such as self-appraisal, self-directed goal setting, self-implementation of change, and self-evaluation of change efforts (Halford et al., 1994). According to Halford, Wilson, Lizzio, and Moore (2002), relationship self-regulation increased through teaching and enhanced the maintenance of relationship satisfaction in distressed couples.

There are important notions that each partner, instead of targeting and blaming the other for relationship troubles, attends to oneself (Hira & Overall, 2011). According to the strength model of self-regulation, all acts of self-regulation draw on a single, limited resource called self-regulatory strength (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000) observable as the self-regulatory ability available to the individual pursuing a given goal with actions of self-control. Another notion of relationship self-regulation is a reflection of each partner individually and/or conjointly exercised about relationship. Then personal responsibility is taken to enhance the relationship (Halford, 2011). Thus, two major relationship self-regulation aspects can be distinguished: effort and reflectivity/monitoring. Effort is needed to "shield commitment to a chosen action against competing action tendencies" (Koole, Kuhl, Jostmann, & Finkenauer, 2006, p. 362). "Monitoring one's pattern of behaviour and the cognitive and environmental conditions under which occurs is the first step towards doing something to affect it" (Bandura, 2001, p. 8). So the question of what works in couples relationship education is still open. Is self-control the mediator of change? Does relationship education need to enhance it by teaching a structured curriculum? Or maybe change is promoted by partners committing and learning to reflect and monitor their relationship?

The control function of relationship self-regulation was studied after structured couple relationship programmes such as Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE), and Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). Monitoring and reflective functioning in relationship self-regulation have not received the attention of researchers. Most of the studies do not follow up on the self-regulation process after a couple has participated in an educational programme. Moreover, studies by Cornelius and Galen (2007) and Christensen and Baucom (2005) make the point that, by evaluating predicted outcomes, we miss the holistic picture of how couples integrate intervention. For example, we may know that an experiential programme is effective in promoting marital intimacy (Hickmon, Protinsky, & Singh, 1997), but we may still be left with the question of how this happens.

Despite the growing number of studies, there is still the lack of conclusive evidence that any particular approach in relationship education is clearly superior to the others and that the factors of the benefits of education are not clear (Halford & Snyder, 2012). Therefore it is important to try to understand how couples relationship education works.

A majority of the studies have focused mostly on developing and investigating various control aspects of relationship self-regulation. We decided to focus on relationship self-regulation as monitored and reflected by partners so as to explore a different field in this area of study.

By investigating the experience of working on relationships as narrated by the participants themselves, we expected a rich yield of data on how learning from relationship education is absorbed by couples into their lives after an intervention. The aim of the present study is to analyse relationship self-regulation narratives after the relationship education intervention. We focused on experiences in which partners were making the effort to self-regulate their relationship in everyday interactions.

Method

The reasons for choosing narrative methodology to explore work on relationships were following: 1) Our research strategy was based on the premises that storytelling is considered a natural human impulse (White, 1981) and a primary way of making sense of experience (Mishler, 1986). 2) Individuals, when creating meaning from experience, often organise non-systematic encounters into coherent stories (Chamberlain, Stephens, & Lyons, 1997). It is particularly relevant to focus on participants' specific stories, which are real for them. A qualitative research approach within the social constructivism paradigm was used: focus groups were used for data collection and a narrative approach was employed for data analysis.

Description of the Intervention

Reflective Experiential Couple Education (RECE) is an experience and reflection oriented intervention that may help a couple work on their relationship. RECE is a non-religious relationship education programme that focuses on developing awareness in couples' relationships by inviting them to participate in diverse experiential activities and to learn by reflection. It is based on the experiential education model reviewed by Itin (1999) as well as on the reflection model of Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993). The philosophical background of RECE is based on the ideas of J. Dewey (Wong & Pugh, 2001), which hold that merely having an experience is not the same as learning from it. According to Greenaway (2007), experience can be relived: an individual reflects on his or her lived experience and then interprets and generalises this experience to form inner knowledge that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations. Learners personally engage with the learning process.

The program was conducted over two extended weekends. The RECE program consisted of various outdoor and indoor activities, designed for challenging experiences (see Table 1 for a description). The framework is originally conceived by the authors of this article.

Table 1

The Reflective Experiential Couple Education Framework

Aims of RECE	Major steps of the programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To become aware of the experience and share reflections with other couples • To discover more about oneself and the partner 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning to learn; Developing a learning community; Sharing the insights in a peer group 2. Accumulating intensive experience in the couple and in the group 3. Reflecting and constructing meanings 4. Building bridges to real life situations 5. Experimenting - social tasks and dilemma theatre (Boal, 1995) 6. Finalising the experience and, summarising and naming what participants take away

Participants

Ten people (five couples) out of sixteen participants (eight couples) of RECE, aged from 33 to 43 years agreed to participate. One group was composed of women and one of men. The argument for this separation was that partners seemed to feel more at ease speaking about couple relationships in the absence of their partners, allowing researches to be sensitive to the relational aspects of the inquiry and to the power relationship in couple, while keeping in mind that sensitive topics are relationally defined (Hydén & Bülow, 2003). All couples had been married for between eight and thirteen years and had between one and five children. One woman was in her second marriage; all other participants were in their first marriage. All participants were university graduates living in the capital city, and all were employed, except two women who were on maternity leave at the time of inquiry.

Participants signed a consent form for participation, which allowed for the recording and transcription of the discussions. All participants were informed of their rights to refuse or to discontinue their participation in the study. Assigning different names in the transcribed material allowed participants' identities to be concealed.

Procedure

Two focus groups were conducted during two slots of 1.5 hours each with a 30-minute break in between. Two psychologists with experience in qualitative research moderated the semi-structured focus groups. This allowed participants to freely narrate their experiences. Discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research location was at the premises of a consulting company in Lithuania known for its expertise in the area of experiential learning.

Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences and relate what they learned to their situation at home. Narratives were elicited in follow-up focus groups six months after the delivery of the RECE program. The participants were asked: "Could you remember a situation, an example or a moment about working on relationship, which you could relate to this couple training event?" Follow-up questions such as "Tell me more about that" and "What did you mean by that?" were used for clarification and elaboration.

Analytic Procedures

Researchers analysed transcripts of conversations that occurred naturally during the focus group. Narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) was begun by identifying narratives. The criteria for identifying narratives were the following:

- a. The narrative indicated an actual day-to-day experience lived and remembered by a participant;
- b. A segment of a given participant's lived experience was described with elements of sequence and relation to context.

An inductive coding procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to generate codes from narratives. Initial coding involved reading the transcripts and making notes as well as looking through notes and observations made during the focus group and transcription. Meanings were induced from stories constructed by participants. Emergent sub-themes were developed from these codes and clustered with related themes. Researches independently went through each transcript and came together to form a consensus of the sub-themes and themes. Sub-themes consisted of detailed summaries of the interview at the first level of analysis, and academic narratives at the second level were defined.

Different aspects of the emergent themes were discussed in order to increase the trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000) of the study and were finalised after mutually agreed mapping.

Each theme was reviewed and refined in light of the dual criteria for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990). Reading and reducing the research material was a creative process that was guided by constant reflection on the research question, transcripts and observation material. The interpretation procedure was grounded in discursive psychology, with a focus on talk as action (Edwards, 1997), and was based on detailed transcripts. The last step in interpreting the data involved a critical, in-depth understanding of the theme, where researchers' professional psychological knowledge was taken into account. Academic narratives were defined based on the personal stories of research participants.

Limitations of the Study

This study used data collected from only two groups: one male and one female. Using focus groups might also have caused some caveats. Dominant speakers no doubt influenced some of the participants, which affected the narratives and their course. We were using an “each participant has their own time to speak” strategy to allocate time and space for each participant in order to counter-balance the dominance of some of the participants in the group.

Obviously, personal and professional history and preferences for experiential learning as well as the double role of facilitating the RECE and undertaking the research may have influenced the course of this study. Sharing a similar cultural background with the participants (Tracy, 2010) and not being far off in terms of age allowed for better rapport but may have caused oversights on a cultural level. A third researcher, who was unfamiliar with the RECE and gestalt therapy, was brought in to provide an additional perspective (Hill et al., 2005). This helped to note the biases and enhance the integrity of the findings (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Findings and Interpretation

The map of themes and sub-themes is shown in Figure 1.

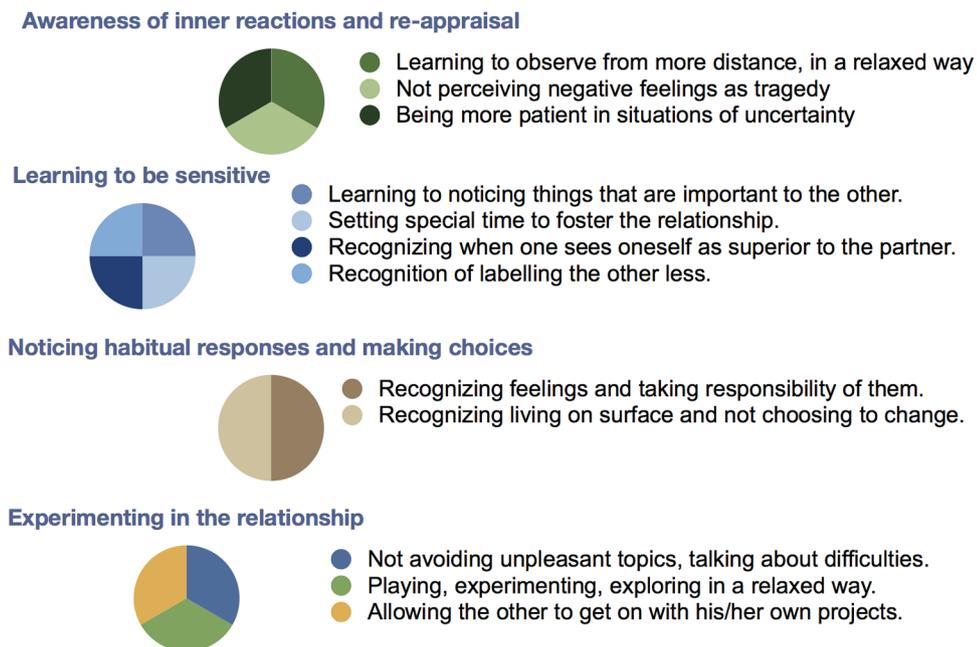


Figure 1. Map of themes on self-regulation in couple relationship.

Four themes were discerned: becoming aware of and re-appraising inner reactions, learning to be sensitive, choosing between the old and the new, and experimenting in the relationship.

Awareness of Inner Reactions and Re-Appraisal

Participants noticed that they were able to “stand aside” in an intense emotional interaction. One female participant explained this in the following statement: *“I become aware that I am standing and shouting. I see myself standing and shouting. I know this at the moment itself”* (46, MA1).

The same tendency was observed in the men’s narrations. Participants recounted being slower and more conscious about their words and actions while interacting with their partners. Here is one story about refraining from commenting on a partner’s behaviour:

“I stop myself during spontaneous comments. I catch myself when I see I have gone too far. I remarked about the time of her coming home, and I felt bad afterwards. I catch myself in this situation: don’t rush to comment, think and so on.” (87, VA2)

The ability to abstain from expressing all negative feelings spontaneously emerged from the conversation of both men and women. It was important for participants to re-define the situation, by dramatising less and re-appraising negative feelings so that they seem less tragic. Miscommunication evoked irritation, but it was no longer seen as something wrong: *“This irritates, but it’s not like. . . It’s not like I’m anxious (...) I do not worry that something is wrong, that something wrong is going on”* (53, MA4). A participant in the men’s group expressed being more patient in situations of uncertainty. He asserted that, when his feelings were not clear to him, he felt calmer and had a sense of hope. He regulated himself by thinking the following: *“I believe she will manage in this situation”* (115, VA6).

Awareness of inner reactions is one of the important factors in the self-regulatory process. This finding is in line with other empirical studies (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003). Gross and Thompson (2007) assert that the self-regulatory process most likely draws upon cognitive resources linked to the regulation of emotions. Increasing meta-cognitive awareness of one’s thoughts diminishes the tendency to become immersed in thoughts or emotions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006; Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

Learning to Be Sensitive

Partners made efforts to turn to each other in difficult situations instead of succumbing to negative feelings and blaming. This process was followed up by partners discovering and noticing things of importance to each other. One participant put this into the following words: *“Another kind of silence has appeared in my life, for sure. One with a more observational stance. Now I make an effort to understand how it is for him at that time.”* (193, MB1)

Participants valued the importance of maintaining their relationship. Analysis showed that the process by which partners relate to each other was attended to and reviewed when necessary. Partners became aware of when they were working on their relationship and when they weren’t, as the following example demonstrates:

“We went to the seminar to work on our relationship for a while and after that we are back behind closed doors. We lived the experience of the seminar at first, but a lot of situations turned out differently. There are times when you work at it and times when you don’t.” (330, MC4)

Learning to be sensitive was about becoming aware of the power imbalance. One participant reported recognising herself as superior to her partner. She had been exposed to many types of therapeutic and self-awareness

training and she used this experience to compare herself to her partner advantageously. She noticed the unfair and destructive nature of this way of configuring the situation. This case illustrated how her acknowledgement of positioning herself as superior was the starting point for regulating her relationship with her partner. Knudson-Martin (2013) shows why power imbalances are destructive to intimate relationships and how couples can create relationships that are less bound by gendered power structures.

Partners became aware of the way they in which they labelled each other in their reflections. They realised that they had made many assumptions. These assumptions had become rigid. One participant made the following statement while reflecting in the focus group:

“It turned into something else; our quality of life is different. That I really can do it less. That there is a result. It changed to something else. I can label less. I was on a mission for myself. It’s working little by little (.5). It changed me personally.” (435, MB4)

The same sub-theme of “labelling less” appeared in the men’s focus group.

Hamamci (2005) reports that most people have little or no awareness of their dysfunctional relationship beliefs. By focusing on sensitivities occurring within the relationship, couples may improve their relationship (Parr, Boyle, & Tejada, 2008). As partners become more aware of how they communicate with each other, they gain a better understanding of their own ineffective communication patterns.

Noticing Habitual Responses and Making Choices

Participants spoke about their habitual responses toward their partners. The following example (Table 2) shows a participant describing her repetitive, anxious reaction to her partner being late coming home from work and accepting responsibility for her feelings. Transcription symbols are used according to Kogan (1998).

Table 2

Example of the Theme “Recognising One’s Own Feelings and Taking Responsibility for Them.”

Line Nr.	Text from focus group
23	Interviewer: I have forgotten your theme, truly speaking (.)
24	Karolina: My partner made me laugh when was talking about his time. Look at this (.hhh). I
25	do not feel the change yet. But I see he is focusing on that and is very precise. I do not know
26	how it is for him. (.5) We haven’t talked. I see he is late half of the time he promises,. He cuts
27	off estimated time. I am irritated at this place of waiting. I need to change something in me
28	(.hh) It is not related to him. I need just not to wait. I just stay sometimes. I do not want
29	,that we are late to go somewhere anymore. Just, eh, eh... (hhhh) I would like to come
30	earlier. I am in a hurry. I will be on time actually, but I have this hustle anyway. This anxiety...
31	Interviewer: Inside yourself?
32	Karolina: This anxiety in me. I experience it <u>every morning</u> (?) now that I have plenty of
33	time to learn it. It is not that I have noticed it and I can change.
34	Interviewer: You have noticed and it persists?
35	Karolina: I noticed, but I cannot change...(5) I mean... sometimes I succeed. It is good that
36	I succeed to notice.
37	Interviewer: What do you notice?
38	Karolina: I am glad that I am able to see the situation and become aware of it.

It seems that Karolina managed regulate her persistent inner responses to her partner. Our analysis shows that she may have abstained from acting and observed herself as if from the outside at the same time. This was an important shift in self-regulation.

Although improvements in their relationships with partners were important to participants, the implementation of those improvements did not always occur. Another participant recognised that there is a choice to be made between a habitual reaction to a partner and a new way of responding:

“To get the best out of it there must be some continuity, yet what I see is a lack of continuity I feel that I’ve simply forgotten it all. Later I settled down. I do have the knowledge . . . but sometimes I still act superficially.” (166, VC1)

Halford et al. (1994) suggested that relationship self-regulation consists of another meta-competency – self-directed goal setting. It involves defining specific, actionable goals for changing one’s behaviour based on a self-appraisal. Self-implementation of change is the process whereby partners take active steps to implement their self-defined goals. Our study contrasted this conceptualisation, because we saw how the process of change was not linear, not straightforward, and not entirely rational. For example, one participant described how difficult it was to ask for what she wanted from her partner, even knowing the benefit of this action from her learning experience. She was in discomfort after she had behaved in her habitual way and had not decided to try something new.

According to Stern (2004), change is based on lived experience. We assume that once partners get a sense that they can choose to respond in a habitual way or try a different response, and then they increase their self-regulation ability.

Experimenting in the Relationship

RECE provided opportunities for safe and challenging experiences. Narratives from the focus group revealed relationship-enhancing behaviours. One participant reported that he has started to talk more to each other. Once they were home, some participants felt encouraged to keep engaging in open and potentially confrontational discussions by not avoiding unpleasant topics in the relationship. They dared to talk about difficulties. In the men’s focus group, this was named the *“not-wrapped in-cotton-wool”* narrative. Some men reported their unwillingness to voice the difficult truth when it emerged, trying to avoid evoking partner’s negative response. One participant reported feelings of weakness saying that he used to act in the *“wrapped-in-cotton-wool”* way because he was anticipating a *“storm of discontent”* from his partner:

“It was a lot of work. She calls and asks . . . she says: when, when are you coming home? I say that I’ll be back at seven. At seven! What? At seven? Mhm . . . Yes, I’ll be back at seven, I say. It was 4:30 pm. Before, I would have said at 5:30 pm {laughing}. That’s the truth.” (72, VC3)

Another participant said that he gave himself permission to experiment, and he did so with enthusiasm. He allowed his partner to do her project instead of taking over and doing it all himself. He explained the experience in the following manner:

“When parking is complicated, she does it the way she wants. This is her project. I know that I can park. I have a different relation to this scenario now and I want to act differently too . . . not to take this pleasure or fun of learning away from her” (325, VD5).

Couples started experimenting with new ways of relating when they felt it was safe to do so. Then feelings of enthusiasm, rather than anxiety, prevailed. Safety is important for being able to look inward and get more relief and acceptance (Sager & Sager, 2005). A safe environment makes partners feel comfortable in expressing themselves and helps guard against lapses into destructive conflict (Halford, 2011).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the relationship self-regulation of couples as narrated by the participants themselves. Both partners from among the participating couples were involved in intervention for couples and research afterwards. The findings of this study can be transferred to similar situations, but they cannot be generalised for all couples' relationships.

All participants noted that they became more aware of their own reactions and thoughts. The participants showed signs of becoming aware of their feelings and needs. They could follow up this awareness by choosing to act upon their impulses or by withdrawing and responding differently. This process of awareness repeats in cycles. We assume that participants' awareness expanded and included wishes and impulses that might have previously gone unnoticed. We see this expansion of awareness as a natural learning process for individuals and for couples describing how reflectivity might act as a mediating factor in relationship self-regulation (Halford, 2011). Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten (2006) outline that self-regulation is a monitoring process involving self-awareness and the feedback loop. It can be strengthened via exercise. Baumeister and Stillman (2008) propose "that the connection between self-regulation and close relationships is reciprocal: healthy close relationships not only follow good self-regulation, they actually strengthen self-regulation" (p. 1).

An analysis of the text uncovered participants' relationship self-regulation. They refrained from quick, unconsidered comments whilst enduring impulses to react. Such reflective processes included: looking at oneself in a detached way, focusing on one's own feelings and wishes, naming, taking responsibility of them and applying in different situations. Partners that are having difficulties in their relationship usually blame each other for misunderstandings. According to our findings, accepting responsibility for one's own reactions is an inward action in relationship regulation. Regulation of intrapersonal emotional reactions could create attitudes that people can become more conscious of, which in turn helps them manage their responses to their partner. Partners make voluntary efforts to regulate emotions (Gross, 2007).

Acknowledging misunderstandings in communication and learning about sensitivity to oneself and to others as narrated by the participants in our study support findings from other studies. As summarised by Diamond and Aspinwall (2003), "optimal emotion regulation is continually sensitive to changing goals and contexts" (p. 149). Their main idea is that social partners continue to serve as external emotion "regulators" over the course of life. We have discovered that relationship self-regulation emerged as the process of regulating intrapersonal emotional responses to a partner. A change mechanism helps partners to see each other through "softening" lenses (Davis, Lebow, & Sprenkle, 2012). The participants in our study reported efforts to learn to be sensitive to their partners and to recognise misunderstandings in communication.

We encountered different meanings that participants constructed about working on their relationships in the intervention that they all experienced together. Winitzky and Kauchak (1997) have maintained that learners can create different meanings from the same learning experience. Each couple has their own context in which knowledge

from experience is constructed. This study suggests that relationship self-regulation after couple relationship education is complex and varied. Some participants reported that they ceased avoiding tense conversations and questioned their own usual patterned roles, while others pointed out reflectivity on response to partner. Illeris (2007) found that “the more complex the type of individual acquisition is, the more likely it is that the learning could be characterised as experiential” (Illeris, 2007, p. 93). We think that simplification and a focus on a deliberate goal-oriented component of self-regulation does not represent the full complexity of processes that partners experience in real life. Relationship self-regulation may not only be perceived as series deliberate, planned actions in working on couple's relationship. Our study highlights that relationship self-regulation emerged as focusing on oneself, trying to understand one's own feelings and needs, experimenting to meet these needs, and exploring resources.

We are aware that “mediation effects might be moderated by pre-intervention levels of the mediator” (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013, p. 521). It is not enough to observe mediating factors in assessing the effectiveness of relationship education. It is very important to note what couples bring with them before the intervention as risk factors as well as their level of relationship satisfaction, which may be important in this situation (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). This has not been included in our research, and it should be considered in future studies.

Conclusions

The goals of couple intervention are, by definition, long term in nature. This study revealed that couples continue to work on their relationship six months after the intervention. Self-regulation in couple relationships, narrated by the partners themselves, has important aspects of partners' continuous awareness of their inner reactions, learning to be sensitive to one another, choosing or not new path in behaviour, and experimenting in the relationship. The variety and multidimensionality of meanings was constructed from the same experience of intervention. Partners learned something they did not expect to learn. Our findings allowed us to get a minor glimpse of the complexity of couple behaviour after relationship education. A qualitative study of mechanisms of change in relationships after intervention leaves many questions unanswered. For example, how the awareness of inner reactions is used by partners one or five years later; what the processes of dyadic self-regulation are; what the inner resources are used by a couple to redirect habitual reactions; how they naturally create space for experimenting with new things in their relationship.

Implications for Reflective Experiential Couple Education Practice

The integration of intervention experience is a nonlinear process. Individuals expand their awareness in context with their partner, but the process is volatile and needs some support in the form of counselling sessions afterwards, or sequential couple intervention sessions to ground the insights in daily life.

Notes

i) Meta-narrative “is a global or totalising cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (Stephens & McCallum, 1998).

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the thoughtful and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article as well as language editors Darius Ross and Tone Horwood.

References

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 1-26. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1
- Baumeister, R. F., Gailliot, M., DeWall, C. N., & Oaten, M. (2006). Self-regulation and personality: How interventions increase regulatory success, and how depletion moderates the effects of traits on behavior. *Journal of Personality*, 74(6), 1773-1801. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2006.00428.x
- Baumeister, R. F., Heatherton, T. F., & Tice, D. M. (1994). *Losing control: How and why people fail at self-regulation*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Stillman, T. F. (2008). Self-regulation and close relationships. In J. V. Wood, A. Tesser, & J. G. Holmes (Eds.), *The self and social relationships* (pp. 139-158). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., & Tice, D. M. (2007). The strength model of self-control. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16, 351-355. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00534.x
- Boal, A. (1995). *The rainbow of desire: The Boal method of theatre and therapy*. London, England: Routledge.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Walker, D. (Eds.). (1993). *Using experience for learning*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 822-848. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822
- Butner, J., Diamond, L. M., & Hicks, A. M. (2007). Attachment style and two forms of affect coregulation between romantic partners. *Personal Relationships*, 14, 431-455. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00164.x
- Chamberlain, K., Stephens, C., & Lyons, A. C. (1997). Encompassing experience: Meanings and methods in health psychology. *Psychology & Health*, 12(5), 691-709. doi:10.1080/08870449708407415
- Christensen, A., & Baucom, D. H. (2005). Methodologically sound, cost-effective research on the outcome of couple therapy. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19, 6-17. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.19.1.6
- Cornelius, T. L., & Galen, A. (2007). Behavioral and physiological components of communication training: Does the topic affect outcome? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 69, 608-620. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00395.x
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2

- Davis, S. D., Lebow, J. L., & Sprenkle, D. H. (2012). Common factors of change in couple therapy. *Behavior Therapy, 43*(1), 36-48. doi:10.1016/j.beth.2011.01.009
- Diamond, L. M., & Aspinwall, L. G. (2003). Emotion regulation across the life span: An integrative perspective emphasizing self-regulation, positive affect, and dyadic processes. *Motivation and Emotion, 27*(2), 125-156. doi:10.1023/A:1024521920068
- Dijksterhuis, A., & Nordgren, L. F. (2006). A theory of unconscious thought. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1*, 95-109. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00007.x
- Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and cognition*. London, England: Sage.
- Finkel, E. J., & Campbell, W. K. (2001). Self-control and accommodation in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*, 263-277. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.81.2.263
- Finkel, E. J., Campbell, W. K., Brunell, A. B., Dalton, A. N., Scarbeck, S. J., & Chartrand, T. L. (2006). High-maintenance interaction: Inefficient social coordination impairs self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*(3), 456-475. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.91.3.456
- Fitzsimons, G. M., & Finkel, E. J. (2012). Outsourcing effort to close others. In L. Campbell, J. G. La Guardia, J. M. Olson, & M. P. Zanna (Eds.), *The science of the couple: The Ontario symposium* (Vol. 12, pp. 41-57). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Fraser, H. (2004). Doing narrative research: Analysing personal stories line by line. *Qualitative Social Work, 3*(2), 179-201. doi:10.1177/1473325004043383
- Gredler, M. E., & Schwartz, L. S. (1997). Factorial structure of the self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale. *Psychological Reports, 81*(1), 51-57. doi:10.2466/pr0.1997.81.1.51
- Greenaway, R. (2007). Dynamic debriefing. In M. Silberman (Ed.), *The handbook of experiential learning* (pp. 59-80). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.
- Gross, J. J. (2007). *Handbook of emotion regulation*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Gross, J. J., & Thompson, R. A. (2007). Emotion regulation: Conceptual foundations. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 3-24). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Halford, W. K. (2011). *Marriage and relationship education: What works and how to provide it*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Halford, W. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2013). Effects of relationship education on maintenance of couple relationship satisfaction. *Clinical Psychology Review, 33*, 512-525. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2013.02.001
- Halford, W. K., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. (2008). Strengthening couples' relationships with education: Social policy and public health perspectives. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(4), 497-505. doi:10.1037/a0012789
- Halford, W. K., Sanders, M. R., & Behrens, B. C. (1994). Self-regulation in behavioral couples' therapy. *Behavior Therapy, 25*, 431-452. doi:10.1016/S0005-7894(05)80156-X
- Halford, W. K., & Simons, M. (2005). Couple relationship education in Australia. *Family Process, 44*, 147-159. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2005.00050.x

- Halford, W. K., & Snyder, D. K. (2012). Universal processes and common factors in couple therapy and relationship education. *Behavior Therapy, 43*(1), 1-12. doi:[10.1016/j.beth.2011.01.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2011.01.007)
- Halford, W. K., Wilson, K. L., Lizzio, A., & Moore, E. (2002). Does working at a relationship work? Relationship self-regulation and relationship outcomes. In P. Noller & J. A. Feeney (Eds.), *Understanding marriage: Developments in the study of couple interaction* (pp. 493-517). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamamci, Z. (2005). Dysfunctional relationship beliefs in marital conflict. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, 23*(3), 245-261. doi:[10.1007/s10942-005-0013-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-005-0013-y)
- Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., Baldwin, S. A., & Fawcett, E. B. (2008). Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*(5), 723-734. doi:[10.1037/a0012584](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012584)
- Hickmon, W. A., Jr., Protinsky, H. O., & Singh, K. (1997). Increasing marital intimacy: Lessons from marital enrichment. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 19*(4), 581-589. doi:[10.1023/A:1026191223476](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026191223476)
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 196-205. doi:[10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196)
- Hira, S. N., & Overall, N. C. (2011). Improving intimate relationships: Targeting the partner versus changing the self. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 28*, 610-633. doi:[10.1177/0265407510388586](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510388586)
- Hydén, L. C., & Bülow, P. H. (2003). Who's talking: Drawing conclusions from focus groups —Some methodological considerations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 6*(4), 305-321. doi:[10.1080/13645570210124865](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210124865)
- Illeris, K. (2007). What we actually mean by experiential learning? *Human Resource Development Review, 6*(1), 84-95. doi:[10.1177/1534484306296828](https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484306296828)
- Itin, C. M. (1999). Reasserting the philosophy of experiential education as a vehicle for change in the 21st century. *Journal of Experiential Education, 22*(2), 91-98. doi:[10.1177/105382599902200206](https://doi.org/10.1177/105382599902200206)
- Jakubowski, S. F., Milne, E. P., Brunner, H., & Miller, R. B. (2004). A review of empirically supported marital enrichment programs. *Family Relations, 53*, 528-536. doi:[10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00062.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00062.x)
- Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). Why power matters: Creating a foundation of mutual support in couple relationships. *Family Process, 52*(1), 5-18. doi:[10.1111/famp.12011](https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12011)
- Kogan, S. M. (1998). The politics of making meaning: Discourse analysis of a 'postmodern' interview. *Journal of Family Therapy, 20*(3), 229-251. doi:[10.1111/1467-6427.00085](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00085)
- Koole, S. L., Kuhl, J., Jostmann, N. B., & Finkenauer, C. (2006). Self-regulation in interpersonal relationships: The case of action versus state orientation. In K. D. Vohs & E. J. Finkel (Eds.), *Self and relationships: Connecting intrapersonal and interpersonal processes* (pp. 360-383). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Larson, J. H. (2007). Couple enrichment approaches. In J. L. Wetchler (Ed.), *Handbook of clinical issues in couple therapy* (pp. 197-206). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Markman, H. J., & Rhoades, G. K. (2012). Relationship education research: Current status and future directions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 38*(1), 169-200. doi:[10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00247.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00247.x)

- Meyer, M. J., Larson, J. H., Busby, D., & Harper, J. (2012). Working hard or hardly working? Comparing relationship self-regulation levels of cohabiting, married, and remarried individuals. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53(2), 142-155. doi:10.1080/10502556.2012.651987
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, A., & Malinowski, P. (2009). Meditation, mindfulness and cognitive flexibility. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 18, 176-186. doi:10.1016/j.concog.2008.12.008
- Muraven, M., & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). Self-regulation and depletion of limited resources: Does self-control resemble a muscle? *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 247-259. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.126.2.247
- Parker, R. (2005). Research and evaluation in marriage and relationship education. *Family Matters*, 71, 32-35.
- Parr, P., Boyle, R. A., & Tejada, L. (2008). I said, you said: A communication exercise for couples. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 30, 167-173. doi:10.1007/s10591-008-9062-6
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Petch, J. F., Halford, W. K., Creedy, D. K., & Gamble, J. (2012). A randomized controlled trial of a couple relationship and co-parenting program (Couple CARE for Parents) for high- and low-risk new parents. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 80(4), 662-673. doi:10.1037/a0028781
- Roberts, L. J., & Greenberg, D. R. (2002). Observational windows to intimacy processes in marriage. In P. Noller & J. Feeny (Eds.), *Understanding marriage: Developments in the study of couple interaction* (pp.118-149). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sager, D. E., & Sager, W. G. (2005). SANCTUS marriage enrichment. *The Family Journal*, 13(2), 212-218. doi:10.1177/1066480704273223
- Schoebi, D. (2008). The coregulation of daily affect in marital relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 595-604. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.3.595
- Snyder, D. K., Castellani, A. M., & Whisman, M. A. (2006). Current status and future directions in couple therapy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57, 317-344. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070154
- Stephens, J., & McCallum, R. (1998). *Retelling stories, framing culture: Traditional story and metanarratives in children's literature*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing.
- Stern, D. (2004). *The present moment in psychotherapy and everyday life*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Strack, F., & Deutsch, R. (2004). Reflective and impulsive determinants of social behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8, 220-247. doi:10.1207/s15327957pspr0803_1
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "Big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. doi:10.1177/1077800410383121
- Vohs, K. D., & Baumeister, R. F. (2011). *Handbook of self-regulation: Research, theory and applications* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

- White, H. (1981). The value of narrativity in the representation of reality. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *On narrative* (pp. 1-24). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, K. L., Charker, J., Lizzio, A., Halford, K., & Kimlin, S. (2005). Assessing how much couples work at their relationship: The behavioral self-regulation for effective relationships scale. *Journal of Family Psychology, 19*(3), 385-393. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.19.3.385
- Winitzky, N., & Kauchak, D. (1997). Constructivism in teacher education: Applying cognitive theory to teacher learning. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Constructivist teacher education: Building a world of new understandings* (pp. 59-83). London, England: Falmer Press.
- Wong, D., Pugh, K., & Dewey Ideas Group at Michigan State University. (2001). Learning science: A Deweyan perspective. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 38*(3), 317-336. doi:10.1002/1098-2736(200103)38:3<317::AID-TEA1008>3.0.CO;2-9
- Yeh, C. J., & Inman, A. G. (2007). Qualitative data analysis and interpretation in counseling psychology: Strategies for best practices. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*, 369-403. doi:10.1177/0011000006292596

About the Authors

Vilija Girgzde is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute of Psychology, Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, Lithuania. Her primary research interests include couple differentiation, couple conflicts, intervention forms for couples. She has couple and individual therapy practice.

Viktoras Keturakis, Ph.D. (Vilnius University, Lithuania), is gestalt psychotherapist in private practice and lector at Vilnius University, Lithuania. His primary research interests include personality theory in experiential education and gestalt therapy, the impact of experiential interventions and gestalt therapy.

Jolanta Sondaite is an associate professor of Psychology at Mykolas Romeris University. She received her doctorate in Psychology from Lithuanian University of Education Sciences & Vilnius University. Her research interests include conflicts, relationships, family mediation. She also works as a mediator in family and cross-border family mediation conflicts.