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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial.....	3
Iulian Warter	
Corporate Social Responsibility and The Talmudic Principle of Going Beyond the Requirements of The Law: The Cornerstone of Ethics	5
Hershey H. Friedman, Abraham Fried, David Gelb	
Theological Meaning of Technology	27
Mircea Gelu Buta	
Some Problems of Applied Ethics from a Multi-Disciplinary Perspective	33
Aurelian Virgil Băluță	
Emotion Regulation, Relationship Satisfaction, and the Moderating Role of Age: Findings and Ethical Implications	43
Luisa-Diana Antoniac, Tudor-Daniel Huțul, Adina Karner-Huțuleac	
Ethical Challenges in Nanomedicine and Their Impact on Population Acceptance	55
Andreea-Iulia Someșan, Ion Copoeru	
Microbiome Transplant - From an Unconventional Procedure to a New Frontier in the Treatment of Intestinal Disorders	71
Elena Toader, Corina Turcu, Andreea Iacob, Alexandra Marcu, Daniela Damir	

EMOTION REGULATION, RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION, AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF AGE: FINDINGS AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the existing relationships between emotion regulation, relationship satisfaction, and age. The research involved 775 participants: 222 were male (28.6%), and 553 were female (71.4%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 75 years ($M = 26.57$; $SD = 9.55$). Respondents completed questionnaires related to difficulties in emotion regulation, relationship satisfaction, and various socio-demographic data. The results of this show that difficulties in emotion regulation are negatively associated with age and relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, our findings shows age moderating the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction. We explore both theoretical and practical implications, along with ethical considerations associated with this topic.

Keywords: emotion regulation; relationship satisfaction; mental health; ethics

Introduction

The emotions people experience are natural states, often associated with thoughts, feelings, or behavioral responses, which may involve, as appropriate, pleasure or displeasure (Damasio, 1998; Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Panksepp, 1998; Schacter et al., 2011). Experiencing emotions influences human functioning, both at an intrapersonal level and at an interpersonal level, in relation to close individuals (Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008). Depending on the outcomes they bring, experienced emotions can bring positive aspects such as joy, happiness, or satisfaction (Alexander et al., 2021; Cohn et al., 2009; Fredrickson, 2001; Laurent et al., 2023), but also negative aspects, such as stress or anxiety (Chin et al., 2017; Cislser et al., 2010). Given the wide variety of outcomes people may experience regarding their own emotions, careful analysis of the ways in which individuals can regulate their feelings is important. Adaptive means can bring about better self-understanding, a better understanding of the feelings and experiences of others, as well as of the world itself. Furthermore, emotional regulation management can lead to better management of negative mental health outcomes (Riaz et al., 2021).

Difficulties in emotion regulation and mental health

Emotion Regulation (ER) encompasses diverse strategies aimed at monitoring and altering the frequency, intensity, duration, and expression of various emotions, particularly within the framework of goal-directed behavior (Gross, 2013; Kring, 2010). Depending on the context, individuals may resort to adaptive emotional regulation strategies or maladaptive emotional regulation strategies, referred to as emotional dysregulation. Negative emotional regulation strategies can manifest in various ways, including through addictions (Karner-Huțuleac & Huțul, 2023), anxiety or sadness (Michopoulos et al., 2017). These can trigger a cascade of psychological processes and feelings that can affect long-term health (Renna, 2021). Adaptive emotion regulation strategies involve changing the experience of intense

emotions to facilitate the attainment of desired goals (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). A maladaptive mode of emotional regulation (emotional dysregulation) represents “*maladaptive emotional responsiveness reflected in dysfunctional understanding, reactivity, and management*” (Mennin et al., 2007). Difficulties in emotional regulation have been associated with various negative factors in the literature, including mental health (Gross & Muñoz, 1995), physical well-being (Sapolsky, 2007), satisfaction in relationships (Murray, 2005), or performance in professional settings (Diefendorff et al., 2000).

While emotion regulation tactics might offer immediate relief, over time, maladaptive strategies focused on avoidance or escape are likely to lead to increased detachment from fulfilling activities such as relationships and leisure pursuits, as well as heightened emotional distress (Tull et al., 2004).

It is assumed that general emotion regulation skills contribute to the adoption of more effective emotion regulation strategies in the present tense and the ability to flexibly use emotion regulation strategies to meet specific situational demands and individual aims (Tull et al., 2020). For example, greater emotional awareness and clarity would provide individuals with a better sense of the most effective emotion regulation strategies for a given situation.

Adults, compared to younger individuals, tend to report a greater ability to regulate their own emotions (Cheavens et al., 2008). As people grow, their attention is directed towards problem-solving, with individuals becoming more susceptible to reflecting on their own emotional states and seeking more adaptive strategies to cope with emotions (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). Thus, adults possess a greater life experience, which has led them to navigate through numerous instances of emotional challenge (Ami & David, 2020). Additionally, it is known that older adults from various backgrounds (i.e., European, African, and Chinese Americans, Catholic American, and Norwegians) have exhibited greater emotional control compared to younger adults (Gross et al., 1997). In turn, younger individuals exhibit a higher degree of immaturity compared to older individuals (Hodgkinson et al., 2021).

Relationship satisfaction and emotion regulation

When an individual is satisfied with their relationship, couple relationships have positive implications for overall well-being (Proulx et al., 2007). At the same time, when individuals are in a dysfunctional relationship, this can negatively affect psychological health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Whisman, 2007). One of the factors that can affect relationship satisfaction is emotional regulation (Rick et al., 2017). Within relationships, better emotional regulation can improve the quality of the relationship itself through enhanced communication, sexual satisfaction, and a deeper connection with both one's own emotions and those of the partner.

Regarding couple relationships, it is well-documented that men report higher relationship satisfaction than females (Jackson et al., 2014; Rick et al., 2017; Schumm et al., 1998). An interesting aspect is that women report better awareness of their own emotions (Ciarrochi et al., 2005; Rick et al., 2017), while men have a greater ability to engage in goal-directed behaviors when experiencing negative emotions (Rick et al., 2017; Salsman & Linehan, 2012). Also, it is important to note that challenges in emotional regulation may exert a more significant influence on couple satisfaction (Todorov et al., 2023).

Ethical aspects in the research of emotions

We know that when conducting research, it is crucial to consider a series of important aspects and not to overlook the ethical implications associated. This is particularly important when investigating the depths of human emotions. We have a significant ethical

responsibility towards individuals involved in research, as previously highlighted in the literature, individuals are prompted to reflect on their own emotions when completing a questionnaire battery. Such reflections not only have positive outcomes but can also put individuals in a position where they have to relive negative experiences from the past. Thus, when researching emotions, as we are doing in this study as well, we must be aware that individuals may experience negative outcomes, such as:

(I) anxiety or stress – when individuals are prompted to connect with their own emotions, they may experience feelings of anxiety or stress, especially when they are asked to recall moments of overly intense emotions or painful memories. In other words, when exploring one's own emotional universe and when individuals focus on their own experiences, feelings of psychological discomfort or emotional tension may arise (De Castella et al., 2013);

(II) depression – for some individuals, reflecting on their own emotional experiences may contribute to intensifying feelings of negative emotions such as sadness or despair, which, subsequently, can lead individuals to depression, melancholy, or hopelessness (Takano & Tanno, 2009);

(III) Self-judgment – we know that the process of analyzing one's own emotions can lead individuals to engage in a form of harsh self-evaluation, where individuals may begin to criticize or reproach their own emotions when faced with their own experiences. Building on this idea, it can be said that when an individual experiences extreme internal pressure, feelings of guilt and shame may develop, which can arise even in the case where a person experiences symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Birrer & Michael, 2011; Michael et al., 2007; Speckens et al., 2007);

(IV) Social isolation – the consequences of emotional experiences can negatively disrupt an individual's behavior, manifested by avoiding contexts that may stimulate interactions with those around them. People may resort to such social isolation when faced with their own emotions and do not have another adaptive way of emotional regulation. It should be emphasized that such withdrawal can involve negative experiences in various areas, such as limiting contact with family, friends, or colleagues (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Seefeldt & Seefeldt, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018);

In line with all the aforementioned aspects, when conducting research on emotions, we must consider that our respondents may experience one or more of the negative outcomes mentioned earlier. Therefore, when conducting research, we must do everything in our power to minimize the negative feelings experienced by our respondents. Thus, the general recommendations that researchers must consider should start with approval by an ethics committee. Considering all the negative outcomes that respondents may experience as a result of being confronted with reflecting on their own emotions, this committee plays a crucial role. It verifies whether the research design is safe for respondents or not. Another recommendation we offer is the collaboration between researchers and psychotherapists, clinicians, or mental health workers. Specifically, in the mandatory informed consent in a study, an email address or a contact phone number can be provided in case a person experiences negative outcomes as a result of being confronted with their own emotions when participating in research.

The present study

Building upon previous research regarding emotion regulation, relationship satisfaction, and age, the main aim of the current study is to extend the literature to the population in Romania, one in which data on these aspects are extremely scarce. Such an exploration can contribute to the development of optimal therapeutic intervention programs for individuals facing emotional difficulties. The study focuses exclusively on individuals in

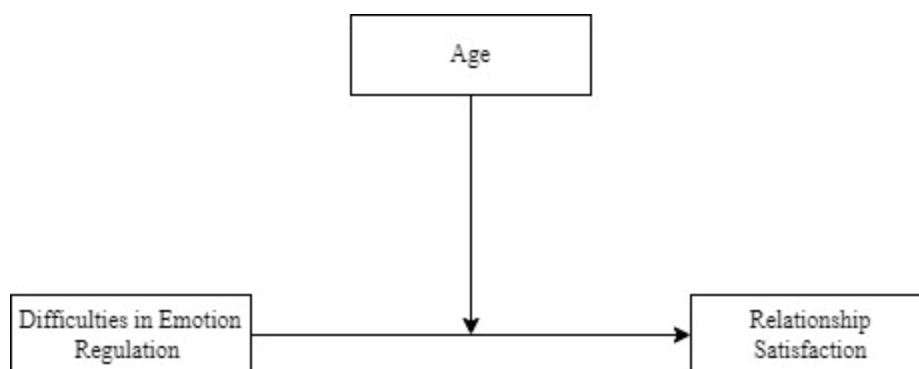
romantic relationships, considering the importance of such relationships in relation to emotional regulation modalities.

Hypotheses

H1. There are significant associations between difficulties in emotion regulation, relationship satisfaction, and age.

H2. The relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction is moderated by age. We expect the association between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction to be stronger at a younger age.

Figure 1. The proposed moderation model for the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction



Method

Participants and procedure

In this research, 775 participants aged between 18 and 75 ($M = 26.57$; $SD = 9.55$) took part. Of these, 222 were male (28.6%) and 553 were female (71.4%). Regarding income, 272 earn monthly below 2000 RON (approximately 400 EUR), 265 earn monthly between 2000 RON and 5000 RON (between approximately 400 and 1000 EUR), while 99 earn monthly over 5000 RON (approximately 1000 EUR), and 139 chose not to respond. This approach regarding the income of respondents has been previously employed in studies that included the population of Romania (Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2023). Regarding education, 328 have completed at most high school, while 447 have at least a bachelor's degree.

The study was conducted using the snowballing technique, employing a convenience sample of Romanians. The data was collected during the period of January 12, 2024, to January 27, 2024. The battery of instruments was administered through the online platform Google Forms. The link was distributed on social media in groups with diverse backgrounds (e.g., student groups, groups of residents in major Romanian cities, or groups of psychology enthusiasts). The average completion time was approximately 10 minutes. The only inclusion criteria for the study were: (1) being at least 18 years old at the time of completing the questionnaire, and (2) being in a romantic relationship at the time of completing the questionnaire.

All individuals participated in the research entirely voluntarily and were required to read information regarding data anonymity and data protection before completing the questionnaires. Additionally, they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any moment without consequences. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical

guidelines from the faculty where the authors are affiliated, adhering to the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki.

Measures

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. To measure this construct, we utilized the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). This is a self-report scale comprising 36 items (e.g., “*When I’m upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time*”) that inquire about respondents’ relationships with their emotions. The instrument has demonstrated its psychometric properties over time (Hallion et al., 2018), including in studies conducted in Romania (Bostan & Zaharia, 2016). An Alpha Cronbach of $\alpha = .94$ was obtained. Higher scores indicate a higher level of difficulties in emotion regulation.

Relationship Satisfaction. To assess individuals’ levels of relationship satisfaction, we employ a single item (“*In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?*”). This item is the unique component of the instrument “*Relationship Assessment Scale-1*” (RAS-1; Fülöp et al., 2022). This instrument is the shortened version of the classic and well-known scale “*Relationship Assessment Scale-7*” (RAS-7; Hendrick, 1988). It is important to mention that the psychometric properties of using a single item for relationship satisfaction have been demonstrated (Fülöp et al., 2022). High scores indicate a high level of relationship satisfaction.

Socio-demographic. In terms of socio-demographic data, gender, age, income, education level, and marital status were collected.

Results

Overview of the statistical analysis

Firstly, we conducted preliminary analyses, and then we tested the associations between the main variables. Finally, we tested the moderating role of age on the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction, using the SPSS macro PROCESS – Model 1, with a 95% confidence interval (CI) and 5000 bootstrapped samples.

Preliminary data analyses

We computed the Skewness and Kurtosis values to assess the normality of the distributions (Table 1), and all the Skewness and Kurtosis values were within the ± 2 limit (George & Mallery, 2010). Statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS program, version 26.

Table 1. Descriptive statistic

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Difficulties in emotion regulation	87.43	24.64	.32	-.46
Age	26.57	9.55	1.56	1.88
Relationship satisfaction	3.70	2.88	-.31	-1.64

Hypothesis testing

Associations between the main variables

We used Pearson correlation to test the associations between the main variables. The results (Table 2) suggested that difficulties in emotion regulation is negatively associated with age and relationship satisfaction.

Table 2. Associations among the main variables

	1	2	3
Difficulties in emotion regulation	-		

Age	-.27*	-	
Relationship satisfaction	-.19*	.13*	-

Note: * $p < .001$

The moderating role of age on the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction

We used the SPSS macro program PROCESS – Model 1 (95% confidence interval (CI); 5000 bootstrapped samples) to explore the potential moderating roles of age on the link between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction (Hayes & Preacher, 2013). The direct effect of difficulties in emotion regulation on relationship satisfaction was moderated by age, as their interactions was significant ($b = .009$, $SE = .005$, $p = .04$). Furthermore, change in R^2 due to age as a moderator comes out to be .004 and $p = .04$. The association between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction was strongest for participants with lower age ($b = -.025$, $SE = .005$, $p = .001$) than in those with average age ($b = -.022$, $SE = .04$, $p = .001$). This relationship was not significant for individuals of older age ($b = -.009$, $SE = .006$, $p = .16$).

Discussions

Our results show that difficulties in emotion regulation are negatively associated with age and relationship satisfaction. Our result regarding emotional regulation and relationship satisfaction is consistent with the specialized literature, which has shown that when people are in a dysfunctional relationship, they negatively impact their psychological health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Whisman, 2007). As shown in the literature, one of the factors involved in psychological health is a good mode of emotional regulation (Rick et al., 2017). The explanations for this result can be numerous and may reside in various aspects. For example, when an individual regulates their emotions better, they may experience more efficient and open communication within the couple relationship. In such a framework, partners can openly and constructively express their emotions when communicating. At the same time, a higher degree of difficulties in emotion regulation may lead to maladaptive means of conflict resolution. Partners lacking emotional regulation may not effectively manage their impulses and emotional reactions within the couple. Additionally, a higher degree of emotional regulation can bring more empathy and support within the couple relationship, inherently increasing the level of couple satisfaction. These findings, in light of the literature showing that aspects such as (I) men report higher relationship satisfaction than women females (Jackson et al., 2014; Rick et al., 2017; Schumm et al., 1998), (II) women report better awareness of their emotions (Ciarrochi et al., 2005; Rick et al., 2017), and (III) men have greater ability to engage in goal-directed behaviors when experiencing negative emotions, can be of practical use (Rick et al., 2017; Salsman & Linehan, 2012). Thus, all mental health workers can build upon these aspects in order to implement individualized interventions in psychotherapy sessions. In the context of these psychotherapeutic interventions, it is important to consider ethical aspects, given that the analysis of one's own emotions can be accompanied by negative outcomes such as social isolation, anxiety, depression, or other negative aspects (Birrer & Michael, 2011; De Castella et al., 2013; Speckens et al., 2007; Takano & Tanno, 2009). Considering these negative aspects, psychotherapists should take all necessary ethical protective measures. For instance, when providing a questionnaire for clients to complete at home as part of the therapeutic process, it is recommended that the therapist proactively provide the client with the necessary self-care tools. More specifically, if, for example, the client is required to complete a questionnaire about emotions at home and this activity triggers negative emotions, it would be advisable for the therapist to also provide the client with guided meditation or mindfulness videos to help

mitigate any negative effects. Therefore, from an ethical standpoint, it is imperative that psychotherapists prioritize the well-being and emotional safety of their clients by providing comprehensive support beyond the therapeutic session.

On another note, our result regarding age and emotional regulation may have several important explanations. For example, older age may bring about greater emotional development and maturity, because they tend to assert a higher capacity to manage their own emotions (Cheavens et al., 2008). This occurs because as people age, they can develop more effective abilities and resources for their own emotional regulation, and over the years, accumulated experiences can lead to greater emotional control (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). Additionally, older age also entails more life experience (Ami & David, 2020). Naturally, older individuals have likely been exposed to a variety of situations and multiple emotional challenges (Ami & David, 2020). Such exposure can aid in the development of emotional regulation skills by learning, for example, better management of negative mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety, depression, or other negative feelings (Riaz et al., 2021). Furthermore, with age, psychological resources, life perspectives, and priorities can develop. All these aspects can function as protective factors for mental health and one's own emotional regulation.

Also, our findings shows age moderating the relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction. The association between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction was strongest for participants with lower age than in those with average age. This relationship was not significant for individuals of older age. Our results were in line with the expectations we had, in the sense that the association between difficulties in emotion regulation and relationship satisfaction was stronger at a younger age. The explanations for this relationship may stem from the fact that younger individuals have lower emotional maturity (Hodgkinson et al., 2021). Thus, it is much more difficult for them to regulate their emotions effectively, and therefore, difficulties in emotional regulation can have a greater impact on couple satisfaction (Todorov et al., 2023). Additionally, an additional explanation may lie in the fact that younger individuals have less experience in managing conflicts. The older we get, the more experience we have in managing conflicts and interpersonal relationships with others. Given the results regarding younger and older participants, we need to understand this dynamic ethically, in the sense that our findings remind us of the necessity to protect the well-being of participants who may be more vulnerable to experiencing negative effects of difficulties in emotional regulation. Therefore, it is important to provide additional support materials to participants based on their age (additional reading materials, audio-visual materials, etc.) through which they can mitigate potential negative effects of the research on them. These materials can be adapted according to the age of the participants.

Theoretical and practical implications

We consider that our study has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, our results enhance knowledge regarding relationship satisfaction and difficulties in emotion regulation with data from a less studied population, that of Romania. Thus, our findings can serve as a starting point for further studies in Romania regarding emotion research. In addition to possible future research in Romania that can build upon our results, studies conducted in other countries with populations sharing similar characteristics can also do the same. From a practical standpoint, we believe that our findings are useful for individuals working in therapy settings with people experiencing the impact of emotions on daily life. Thus, psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, or other mental health professionals can guide their intervention based on the way our study revealed the mechanisms of emotions in the individuals involved.

Ethical implications

Regarding the ethical implications, we consider that the present study contributes to strengthening an optimal ethical framework for researching emotions and mental health, promoting the protection of participants, beneficiaries of psychological services, and the promotion of mental health. Therefore, by highlighting the negative emotional effects that research volunteers may experience following the completion of the battery of questionnaires, our study emphasizes the importance of protecting and respecting individual rights. Additionally, by promoting the identification of ethical risks and concerns associated with exploring personal emotions, our work contributes to promoting ethical standards in the mental health field. Ultimately, our results can serve as extremely valuable resources for mental health practitioners such as psychotherapists or clinical psychologists, helping them better understand the ethical risks and responsibilities associated with both researching and managing emotions in a therapeutic context.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the fact that our study has several strengths, we believe there are several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the proportion of male respondents to female respondents was not balanced, with women being predominant in our research. In this regard, future studies should take this aspect into account. Secondly, we did not measure the duration of the relationship, which is an extremely important aspect in the literature on relationship satisfaction. Future works could address this aspect, including along with other factors that may influence the quality of the relationship. Thirdly, future works could involve only couples' partners and measure their perceptions regarding their own relationship. Another limitation to consider in future studies is that we did not verify whether the individuals involved in the research had attended therapy or not. It is known that individuals who attend therapy tend to have more adaptive coping strategies and emotional regulation, and engaging in psychotherapy can improve attitudes towards change during difficult times (Huțul et al., 2022). Therefore, future studies could include a comparison regarding emotional regulation between individuals who have or have not previously received psychotherapeutic services.

On a different note, in order to further progress in the field of emotion, it is imperative to consider the ethical aspects we have presented and for researchers to implement best practices in responsible research. Therefore, we recommend that future studies pay particular attention to safeguarding the well-being of participants, including through close collaboration with mental health specialists to manage the potential emotional impact of the research. We also recommend that this entire process be described in depth in the relevant procedural section of future studies.

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