

2018

# Mexicans' Emotion Regulation Strategies and Relationship Satisfaction by Gender

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## Recommended Citation

Rivera-Aragón, S., Díaz-Loving, R., Jaen-Cortés, C. I., Villanueva-Orozco, G. B. T., Velasco-Matus, P. W., Cruz-Martínez, L. M., & Romero-Palencia, A. (2018). Mexicans' emotion regulation strategies and relationship satisfaction by gender. In M. Karasawa, M. Yuki, K. Ishii, Y. Uchida, K. Sato, & W. Friedlmeier (Eds.), *Venture into cross-cultural psychology: Proceedings from the 23rd Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp\\_papers/148/](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iaccp_papers/148/)

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## **Abstract**

Vater and Schröder-Abé (2015) found that suppressing expression can potentially interrupt couple communication, therefore producing negative interpersonal behavior and diminishing satisfaction in the relationship. Considering that emotional regulation and relationship satisfaction have shown cultural variations, the object of the study was to assess the relationship of these two constructs in 166 male and 231 female Mexican young adults. Sánchez-Aragón's (2012) Emotional Regulation Strategies Scale, adapted for couples, and Córtes, Reyes, Díaz-Loving, Rivera-Aragón, and Monjaraz's (1994) Relationship Satisfaction Inventory were administered to the sample. Negative and significant correlations were found between both expressive suppression strategies and relationship satisfaction. Data is discussed in terms of the Mexican culture and in terms of gender differences, emphasizing the importance of acquiring skills and abilities to regulate emotions in close relationships. Emotion regulation becomes essential as it fulfills an important social function: it encourages the use of adequate strategies that allow couples' better communication skills, better interpersonal resources and the possibility of solving and/or managing any conflict that may arise in a relationship. Therefore, the use of proper emotion regulation strategies becomes essential in promoting relationship satisfaction, diminishing the odds of deteriorated relationships, and promoting well-being and quality of the relationship.

*Keywords:* Emotion regulation strategies, satisfaction, gender, Mexico, culture

## **Mexicans' Emotion Regulation Strategies and Relationship Satisfaction by Gender**

Relationship satisfaction is and has often been the reference point for evaluating couple interactions, as it is considered an indicator of the quality of the relationship (Díaz-Loving, 1990; Díaz-Loving & Sánchez, 2002). Satisfaction has been defined as a complex phenomenon that includes attitudes towards interaction; aspects of the couple, including satisfaction with the emotional reactions of the couple; as well as structural aspects, like the type of organization, the establishment and compliance of rules, and education of children (Martínez, 2004). For this reason, when talking about satisfaction it is also necessary to consider the emotions experienced by each member of the dyad.

Emotional regulation strategies are those actions that modify emotions, whether modifying antecedent factors to emotions (the situation) or modifying some components of the emotion itself (i.e., suppressing or reappraising) (Martínez-Pérez & Sánchez, 2014). Gross and Thompson (2007) state that people use five different processes of emotional regulation, among which we can find the election of situation, modification of the situation, attention, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation.

Identifying how emotion regulation strategies relate to satisfaction is important since during an interaction emotions, cognitions and behaviors (both positive and negative) emerge. These have to be managed to produce positive feelings and satisfaction based on the way in which members of a dyad react, automatically or controlled, in order to modulate, suppress or enhance emotional experiences (Sánchez, 2016).

Some studies (e.g., Yuan, McCarthy, Holley, & Levenson, 2010) show that positive emotions are a key component in order to achieve satisfaction and well-being; they allow the individual to build and construct personal and psychological assets that enhance behaviors and cognitions that turn out to be essential to cope with negative situations.

Another fundamental element that should be taken into account is the fact that there is an important effect of culture on interaction well-being. Interpersonal relationships are heavily guided by social norms, customs and expectations that are derived from culture (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). In particular, satisfaction with one's couple may largely depend on the degree to which a relationship fulfills culturally determined expectations and obligations (Lucas et al., 2008). Regarding this, Cheung (2005) states that much of her marriage research findings on Eastern Europe shows that men reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than their wives, while Western men reported less marital satisfaction than their Eastern counterparts. Given that Mexico is considered a collectivist culture where family comes before the individual, and males normally have power while females tend to sacrifice themselves, favoring family, it seems logical that research has found that men show higher levels of satisfaction towards the relationship in comparison to women (Díaz Guerrero, 1994, 2003). In addition, although social obligations are a defining feature of relationships in many collectivistic Eastern cultures, such influences may be viewed as obstacles to personal happiness in individualistic Western cultures (Fiske et al., 1998).

Regarding satisfaction in Mexican couples, Ojeda, Melby, Sánchez, and Rodarte (2007) found that males who say they are satisfied with the level of emotional bonding in their relationship reported higher levels of expression and manifestation of emotions (referred to as positive femininity in the literature; e.g., Spence & Helmreich, 1978) with their partner, while satisfaction in females is more related to instrumental and agentic attributes (referred to as positive masculine traits in the literature; e.g., Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Given that positive emotions play an essential role in relationship satisfaction for both males and females (Diaz-Loving & Sanchez-Aragon, 2002), it presents the opportunity to study which emotions are involved in producing different levels of well-being on each member of couples. Emotions are generally classified according to their subjective experience, and divided into two areas: positive emotions, such as love and happiness; and negative emotions, such as anger, sadness and fear (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990). In terms of the regulation of emotions, constructive regulation is associated with well-being (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butze, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005). Kriegerlewicz (2006) found that couples who have greater satisfaction are those who use positive strategies to solve conflicts. As an example, dialogue and loyalty are rarely used as regulators for escape or avoidance. Effective emotion regulation (or emotional regulation) is difficult when people lack the necessary skills, or these skills are impaired or damaged, resulting in inappropriate emotional regulation characterized by excessive intensity or an enormous inhibition of emotions. In fact, such inadequate emotion regulation strategies are cause of clinical psychological syndromes (Reyes, 2013). Hence, it is important to properly regulate emotions to enhance well-being both for the individual and the couple.

Research has shown that extraversion, openness, kindness and awareness are associated with more adaptive emotion regulation techniques, which in turn predict positive interpersonal behavior and lead to greater relationship satisfaction. In contrast, neuroticism is linked to dysfunctional emotional regulation and interpersonal behavior, which leads to lower relationship satisfaction (Vater & Schröder, 2015). These researchers also found that expressive suppression has the potential to disrupt communication with the partner, precipitating negative interpersonal behavior, which decreases the satisfaction with the relationship. In general, Bradbury and Shaffer (2012) found that people who have difficulty regulating their emotions experience lower satisfaction in their love relationships. It has also been shown that individuals use emotional regulation strategies like expressive suppression as a response modulator that involves the inhibition of expressive behaviors and cognitive reappraisal. These strategies in turn are used to create cognitive and situational changes that potentially generate positive and negative emotions, modifying the emotional impact they generate, and therefore favoring marital satisfaction in its multiple manifestations (Sánchez, Díaz, & López, 2008). On the other hand, the presence of negative emotions like anger, fear and sadness vary in their intensity; their presence produces both psychological and physiological changes that, although they fulfill some adaptive functions for the individual, actually can deteriorate the relationships, productivity, well-being and quality of life of the members of the family (Taylor & Sánchez, 2014).

The impact of culture on satisfaction has recently become an important topic of research (Ratzlaff, Matsumoto, Kouznetsova, Raroque, & Ray, 2000). According to Hofstede (2011), culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 3). Matsumoto (2000) defines culture as a dynamic system of explicit and implicit rules established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors, shared by a group and harbored differently by each specific unit within such group. Matsumoto also states that if a person agrees with the shared values or behaviors of their group, then that culture resides in him/her; if he/she does not share those values or behaviors, then he/she does not share that culture. Triandis, Bontempo, Leung, and Hui (1990) distinguish three levels of culture: the cultural level (usually measured by nation or other geographic grouping), the demographic level (measured by ethnicity, race, gender, or other socio-demographic characteristics), and the individual level (unique variations on any individual).

As an effect of growing in a particular culture and receiving different socialization and enculturation practices, cultural differences may exist in these emotion regulation processes. For instance, culture could affect antecedent-focused strategies (such as reappraisal) because cultures differ in their worldviews, ideologies, values, and concepts of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Matsumoto, 2006b; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Matsumoto (2006a) mentions that cultural worldviews are social constructions of reality that presumably characterize important aspects of one's culture (e.g., American culture is individualistic; East Asian cultures are collectivistic and group oriented; Mexican culture is family oriented, etc.). As suggested by Hofstede (2001), Mexico is a collectivist culture that emphasizes values such as conformity, obedience and in-group harmony, at least as ideologies. These, in turn, produce guidelines for individuals in more collectivist cultures to downplay emotional expressions that threaten in-group harmony and to encourage the expression of emotions that maintain or create harmony. Therefore, we hypothesize that men and women that have collective oriented norms and beliefs will choose to consider the position of others as adequate emotion regulation strategies, and thus will show higher levels of satisfaction towards the relationship, family and groups.

As it can be observed, there are sufficient grounds to believe that the strategies of co-regulation of each of the members of the dyad will directly affect the perceived relationship satisfaction for both, and proving this is the purpose of this study. Nonetheless, this study is exploratory for a Mexican sample. The hypotheses that will be guiding this paper are the following:

- H1. Cognitive reappraisal (considering others and the situation) should correlate positively with relationship satisfaction.
- H2. Expressive suppression (not showing emotions) reduces relationship satisfaction in Mexico.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 397 Mexican volunteer participants; 166 were males and 231 were females, with ages between 18 and 70 years ( $M$  age = 32.7 years,  $SD$  = 11.6 years). As for education, 34.8% had undergraduate studies, 26.7% had only a high school education, 13.9% had a technical education and 23.2% had only an elementary and/ or secondary school education. Most reported being married (45.3%) or single (31%), some cohabiting (18.4%), and 5.1% reported being divorced or separated. It is worth mentioning that all single and cohabiting participants were currently involved in a couple relationship. The reason for selecting a sample that included a high proportion of lower education is because lower education is related to more traditional collectivistic norms and values (Díaz Guerrero, 1994).

### Measurements

Relationship satisfaction was measured with selected factors of the Multifaceted Inventory of Marital Satisfaction (MIMS) of Córtes and colleagues (1994), which consists of 48 items with a Likert-type scale (1- I dislike it very much, 5- I like it very much) distributed in 6 factors: Interaction (e.g., The way my partner is interested in me;  $\alpha$  = .89), Physical-sexual (e.g., The way my partner hugs me;  $\alpha$  = .92), Organization and operation (e.g. The way my partner solves family conflicts;  $\alpha$  = .89), Family (e.g., The way my partner distributes family chores;  $\alpha$  = .90), Fun (e.g., Amusement activities that my partner proposes;  $\alpha$  = .86), and Children (e.g., Education that my partner proposes for our children;  $\alpha$  = .90). In total, the items account for 68.8% of the total variance and have a Cronbach's alpha of .90. In the case of single participants, they did not respond to the section about children. This inventory was adapted in such a way that it could be responded to by anyone in any kind of couple relationship (married, dating, cohabiting): instead of answering regarding "marital satisfaction," people were assessed on "couple relationship satisfaction."

To measure self-regulation, the Emotional Regulation Strategies Scale Adapted to Couples (Sánchez-Aragón, 2012) was applied. The scale consists of seven factors with eigenvalues above 1 that explain a total of 57.83% of the variance and whose overall reliability coefficient is .93 with a total of 41 items. The factors are: Expressive suppression-trait (e.g., I try not to show how I feel;  $\alpha$  = .85), Cognitive reappraisal-trait (e.g., I think of what I feel, and that helps me behave accordingly to the situation;  $\alpha$  = .83), Cognitive reappraisal of anger and sadness (e.g., When I get angry, I take my time to think about things and then I react;  $\alpha$  = .85), Expressive suppression of love and happiness (e.g., I can control any expression of love;  $\alpha$  = .86), Expressive suppression of fear and sadness (e.g., When I'm afraid, I do my best to contain what I'm feeling;  $\alpha$  = .83), Cognitive reappraisal of fear (e.g., Before letting myself go by fear, I think of the

reasons behind this;  $\alpha = .76$ ), and Cognitive reappraisal of love and happiness (e.g., When I'm in love, I re-evaluate the best way of expressing my feelings;  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Procedure

In order to obtain the sample, several public places like parks, malls and schools were visited. Also, most of the sample was obtained using a snowball procedure. All participants were asked if they were over 18 years old (adults), if they were currently involved in a couple relationship (even those who were divorced or separated), and were given an informed consent, which reassured them that all participation was voluntary and collected data would remain strictly confidential. The instructions asked each participant to answer honestly to each of the statements that were presents taking in mind that there were no correct or incorrect answers. Participants took around 20 minutes in order to complete all measures and received our gratitude after completing them. Each participant was told that in case they needed some kind of help, support or information they could attend the attention centers for individual help at the University. No reward was given upon completion of the measures.

## Results

Table 1 shows the correlations of emotional regulation with relationship satisfaction; for females, expressive suppression of love and happiness was negatively correlated with the factors of physical-sexual, interaction and children. This means that participants who suppressed love and happiness tended to be less satisfied with these areas in their relationship. The expressive suppression factor of fear and sadness was negatively correlated with satisfaction with organization and functioning, family, physical-sexual, interaction and fun. People who suppressed emotions like fear and sadness did not perceive much satisfaction in these factors. For the factor of expressive suppression as a trait, negative correlations appeared with organization and functioning, physical-sexual and interaction. This means that females who presented suppression as a personality trait had less satisfaction in those areas of the relationship. Regarding cognitive reappraisal factors, they were not significantly related to satisfaction for females.

Emotional regulation factors were also negatively related to relationship satisfaction factors in males. Expressive suppression factor of fear and sadness was related to organization and functioning, interaction and fun. Males who suppressed love and happiness were less satisfied with the sexual part of their relationship, as well as the factors of interaction and fun. Consistent with this, males who had suppressive personality traits perceived less satisfaction with the organization and functioning factors, the physical and sexual aspects of the relationship, as well as perceiving less interaction and fun.



Table 1  
*Correlations Between Relationship Satisfaction and Emotional Regulation in Men and Women*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 CR anger and sadness		.13**	.47**	.49**	.71**	.29**	.50**	.06	.07	.14	.10	.09	.64
2 ES love and happiness	.18**		.46**	.50**	.29**	.51**	.02	-.10	-.01	-.23**	-.20**	-.17*	.07
3 ES fear and sadness	.31**	.54**		.55**	.47**	.55**	.15	-.19*	-.03	-.12	-.20**	-.24**	.11
4 CR love and happiness	.55**	.34**	.35**		.52**	.40**	.43**	.05	.05	.05	.09	.05	-.24
5 CR fear	.72**	.41**	.35**	.60**		.35**	.51**	.05	.09	.06	.08	.07	-.06
6 ES trait	.26**	.50**	.50**	.34**	.32**		.32**	-.19*	-.05	-.15*	-.20**	-.24**	-.07
7 CR trait	.61**	.03	.13*	.48**	.52**	.33**		.16*	.07	.15*	.17*	.14	-.20**
8 Org. and functioning	-.00	-.09	-.23**	-.07	-.00	-.18**	-.01		.66**	.62**	.72**	.79**	.07
9 Family	.05	-.00	-.19**	.01	.07	-.16*	.03	.68**		.48**	.54**	.61**	.12
10 Physical-Sexual	.02	-.20**	-.16*	-.07	-.03	-.13*	.02	.60**	.46**		.82**	.77**	-.17**
11 Interaction	.08	-.14*	-.21**	-.05	.05	-.15*	.04	.72**	.60**	.83**		.86**	-.13
12 Fun	.03	-.08	-.19**	-.01	.03	-.12	-.04	.58**	.57**	.58**	.69**		-.09
13 Children	.00	-.14*	.11	.08	.04	-.01	-.00	.21**	.08	-.00	.02	.00	
Mean	3.10	2.30	2.90	3.00	3.00	3.40	3.50	3.80	3.50	4.10	4.00	3.90	2.40
SD	.82	.82	.80	.84	.73	.80	.73	.91	1.00	.75	.79	.99	2.00

\* p ≤ 0.05; \*\* p ≤ 0.01. Notes. CR (cognitive reappraisal), ES (expressive suppression), Org. (Organization). Correlations for women are at the bottom-left section of the table, while for men are shown in the top right section.

Additionally, males who had a cognitive reappraisal as part of their personality, that is, as a trait, were those who perceived more satisfying couple relationships in terms of organization and functioning, physical and sexual aspects and interaction with their partner. In turn, satisfaction with children decreased with this personality characteristic.

## Discussion

The results indicate that expressive suppression as a strategy and trait is linked to lower relationship satisfaction in areas such as physical-sexual satisfaction, couple fun, interaction and organization. When a person suppresses their positive or negative emotions, satisfaction with the relationship decreases, since it makes it harder for the partner to empathize and feel a sense of solidarity and sharing, which is consistent with previous findings (Vater & Schröder, 2015). Therefore, emotional regulation deficiencies lead to less satisfaction with the relationship and a general negative sense of well-being of the couple (Ryan et al., 2005). Similarly, suppressing emotions, which other authors link to an avoidant personality, is associated with relationship dissatisfaction; couples who have greater satisfaction are those who use positive strategies to solve conflicts such as dialogue and loyalty and rarely use the escape or avoidance strategies (Kriegelewicz, 2006), resulting in a constructive affective interaction link that relates to satisfaction and happiness (Freedman, 1978; Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998). In a similar manner, as the reevaluation of emotions increases (cognitive reappraisal), satisfaction with the relationship in areas such as interaction, physical-sexual and organization also increases for males.

With regards to the correlations of satisfaction and regulation, expressive-suppression strategies were related to a decrease in relationship satisfaction in areas such as physical and sexual, giving a sense of closeness for both males and females; however, caresses and cuddles appear as a relation mainly for females. In general, people who avoid or suppress emotions are dissatisfied with the physical aspects of their relationship. Matsumoto, Seung, and Sanae (2008) suggest that cultures high on Power Distance, Embeddedness and Hierarchy should be associated with less Reappraisal and more Suppression because they value emotions less and require individual-level Suppression to maintain in-group cohesion and harmony. This seems to be what is happening in Mexico; being a collectivist culture, there is a preference for suppressing emotions in order to 1) avoid hurting the family, both nuclear and extended, and 2) maintaining the relationship despite being unsatisfied with the interpersonal relationships, which is learned in family with the purpose of keeping it united.

Cognitive reappraisal associations with relationship satisfaction were higher for males, similar to what Ojeda et al. (2007) found. This is perhaps due to the fact that males tend to be more satisfied than females in their marital interaction (Rivera, 1992), which may be because males use more cognitive reappraisal strategies, leading to better adaptation in the relationship compared to females. Our findings also indicate that lower levels of suppression of negative emotions favor relationship satisfaction, since it allows a

better adjustment in dyadic dynamics. However, for males, more cognitive re-appreciation is related to less satisfaction in the area of children, meaning that when men restructure their feelings, they see less eye to eye with their spouses on how they should treat and educate their children. Thus, Mexican men prefer suppressing their own emotions to favor the well-being of their family and their children. Nevertheless, although they show this pattern, when recurrent or strong conflicts arise, they tend to express their disagreement on how their female partner treats their children.

The findings for Mexico are in line with what Matsumoto et al. (2008) and Butler, Lee, and Gross (2007) propose. It seems that attachment to cultural norms moderates suppression and expression of emotions, and it has immediate consequences during social interaction. As Butler et al. (2007) and Gross and John (2003) suggest, emotion suppression tends to create actively hostile interactions for Europeans, but it seems to work the other way around for people with other cultural orientations. For a Latin-American, collectivist country such as Mexico, this could be working in such a way that emotion suppression leads to higher levels of smiling, laughing, emotional disclosure and the willingness to establish relationships, which could transform into relationship satisfaction.

Other studies (Escobar & Sánchez, 2014) identify that, upon the presence of negative emotions in couple relationships, members of the dyad tend to perceive more support from their couples. In the case of women, they are more reactive towards negative emotions coming from men and tend to be more emotionally expressive, understanding and receptive, even so towards their children. Men, on the other hand, usually suppress their emotions, and they modify the way they evaluate situations in which they face negative emotions like fear, anger or sadness; also, they feel the need to hide what they feel, since they have adopted several cultural norms that men have to be instrumental and caregivers.

A key finding of this study is that emotion regulation is a fundamental component in the development of satisfying relationships, which is why when people regulate their experiences and negative emotions better levels of satisfaction arise, since marriage and couple relationships are an essential part in people's lives. Emotion regulation therefore fulfills an important social function, which encourages further research about the topic, since there are few studies that really study this relationship. The use of adequate strategies allows couples to escape from negative states, which then leads to the maintenance of affective and effective communication behaviors that can repair any damage that has been made and solve any conflict (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Story et al., 2007).

In general, when men consistently use cognitive reappraisal as a coping style, they tend to be more positive about their relationship. When this strategy becomes a trait, it is fundamental to emotion management by fulfilling an adaptive function that allows the generation of thoughts that redefine reality, keeping some things at a distance and allowing the emergence of positive emotions; they are therefore reflected in satisfaction with the interaction, its functioning, organization and physical and sexual aspects (Rivera, Díaz, Velasco, Jaen, & Villanueva, 2014). In conclusion, the use of positive emotional

regulation strategies for both positive and negative emotions is of great importance to increase relationship satisfaction as well as happiness, both for individuals and couples. The applied implications for well-being and the reduction of violence are an important reason to continue research on emotion management and its link to thoughts and behavior.

Our findings suggest that those with adequate emotion regulation are able to evaluate the importance of several life events. Therefore, they can cope with distressful experiences and promote their happiness, which can in turn lead to relationship satisfaction. According to Azizi, Radpey and Alipour (2015), maladaptive strategies promote low levels of relationship satisfaction because they enhance negative attitudes and behaviors such as self-reproach and catastrophizing, increasing worrisome feelings in couples and preserving and intensifying relationship dissatisfaction. Mirgain and Cordova (2007), Abbot (2005), and Azizi et al. (2015) came to similar conclusions compared to those of the present research. It seems that people who use adequate emotion regulation strategies, like thinking on positive events instead of negative ones, designing effective courses to solve problems and attributing positive meanings to events, experience higher levels of relationship satisfaction. The increase in relationship satisfaction may decrease negative emotions and improve people's cognitive and emotional skills, which could help to confront problems in a much more efficient manner.

Emotion regulation gives those capable of regulation a better understanding of their own as well as others' feelings in a much more effective way and allows them to understand different situations better, which makes it easier to enjoy better internal and interpersonal skills (Asadzadeh, Makvandi, & Mobaraki, 2015). Emotion regulation helps couples prevent negative situations and promotes better communication, which can be seen in higher quality of marriages and longer, more satisfied relationships. Our findings suggest that emotion regulation is in fact related to relationship satisfaction. It can be seen that emotion perception, consideration, as well as reasoning about emotions and regulating and managing emotions, are essential in marriages and couples' relationships. The capability to recognize someone's emotions and to regulate one's own transforms into satisfying, lasting relationships.

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