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EFT-C's understanding of couple distress: an overview of evidence from couple and emotion research

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Despite the growing body of research on Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT-C), less research attention has been paid to the validity of EFT-C's description of the relationship dynamics that characterize distressed couples. The current theoretical paper provides a narrative review of evidence from existing emotion and couple research for EFT-C's assumptions on the origin of relationship distress (according to Johnson and to Greenberg and Goldman). Our findings lead to three conclusions: first, the general assumptions outlined by EFT-Cs on need frustration, emotional responses, and interaction patterns are largely supported by the couple and emotion literature. Second, less straightforward evidence was found for the specific elaborations of these principles made by EFT-Cs. Third, a lack of systematic research on EFT-C's assumptions hampers strong conclusions. We suggest future research on this issue with attention toward current insights in the emotion and couple literature.

Practitioner points

- Evidence supports EFT-C's basic assumptions that partners' unmet needs lead to relationship distress and negative emotions, which give rise to negative interaction cycles between partners

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- Direct empirical evidence is available for attachment-related assumptions, whereas assumptions on identity and attraction/liking needs have been less investigated
- Some of EFT-C's more specific assumptions need to be more systematically researched

Keywords: emotionally focused/emotion-focused couple therapy; relational needs; emotions; relationship distress/conflict; topical review.

Since its first publication about thirty years ago (Johnson and Greenberg, 1985), emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT-C) has continued to grow and develop. Johnson's 'Emotionally Focused Therapy' (Johnson, 2004a) and Greenberg and colleagues' 'Emotion-Focused Therapy' (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008) are nowadays regarded as the two major EFT-C approaches. Despite some notable distinctions, they both view 'emotion as the primary organizer of intimate relational experience, influencing significantly both interactional tendencies and patterns, and perceptions and meaning attribution' (Gurman and Fraenkel, 2002, p. 224). They furthermore share, at least to some extent, three basic assumptions about what constitutes the core of couple distress: (a) couple conflict and relationship distress result from partners being unable to meet each other's needs; (b) unmet needs lead to specific negative emotions in partners; and (c) specific negative emotions, accompanying unmet needs, give rise to specific behaviours in partners, resulting in negative interaction cycles between partners over time.

Despite the growing number of studies on EFT-C's treatment process and outcomes, especially on Johnson's approach for distressed couples: good recovery rates (Johnson *et al*., 1999); long-term stability of effects (Greenman and Johnson, 2013); active ingredients (such as the depth of emotional experiences) (Greenman and Johnson, 2013; Lebow *et al*., 2012), the couple therapy literature contains relatively little empirical research specifically investigating EFT-C's theoretical assumptions on the origins of couple conflict and distress. Although models of effective couple therapy may not necessarily follow an understanding of the apparent causes of couple dysfunction (Eisler, 2005), establishing empirical links between the aetiology and treatment of relationship distress may contribute to EFT-C further becoming a theoretically grounded, research-based therapy approach (Lebow, 2010; Nef *et al*., 2012).

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to examine the literature on emotions and couple functioning for empirical evidence that supports

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EFT-C's three main assumptions on couple conflict and distress (see above). Accordingly, in the sections to follow, a narrative review of evidence for each of these assumptions will be provided. This will be done for Johnson's and Greenberg and Goldman's therapy models separately.

Assumption 1: Couple conflict and relationship distress result from partners being unable to meet each other's needs

Both therapy models take a needs perspective on distress and dissatisfaction in intimate relationships (e.g., Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004a), which assumes that partners have certain fundamental psychological needs in intimate relationships that have to be satisfied for optimal couple functioning. Moreover, couple conflict and relationship distress are regarded as resulting from partners being unable to meet each other's needs. Therefore, EFT-C therapists help partners to become aware of their own needs, to express them, and to become responsive to their partners' needs (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Important differences between the two approaches will now be discussed.

In Johnson's approach (Johnson, 2004a), the need for attachment is seen as an overarching need that has to be fulfilled before other needs (such as sexuality) can be met. Informed by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Hazan and Shaver, 1987), intimate relationships are conceptualized as attachment bonds, characterized by partners seeking closeness to and support from each other. Whether one's attachment needs will be fulfilled depends on their partner's answer to the underlying fundamental question, 'Will you be there when I need you?' When one's partner is not emotionally available and responsive, the relationship will not be experienced as a 'secure base', attachment needs will be unmet, and relationships will become distressed (Johnson, 2004a, 2004b, 2009).

Although Greenberg and Goldman (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008) also fully acknowledge the significance of the connection and security from loved ones, they additionally stress the importance of partners' need for identity maintenance within their intimate relationship. The latter involves the validation, confirmation, and acceptance of who one is in terms of one's personality, feelings, and preferences. In their opinion, our view of ourselves, and our identity, is highly affected by significant others. Consequently, individuals are

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concerned about how they are perceived by their partner. The fundamental underlying question is here: 'Do you accept me for who I am?' Being recognized and respected by one's partner is particularly essential as it directly impacts one's self-worth and feelings of agency and influence. On the other hand, dissatisfaction of the need for identity, like feeling disapproved and unnoticed, may lead to ruptures in the self and the relationship.

Greenberg and colleagues (2008) further state that the need for attraction and liking is also important in order to fully understand adult love. The attraction and liking motivational system encompasses affection, warmth, and liking of the partner ('Do you really like me?') and reflects a positive drive, which makes a relationship not only functional but also flourishing. Satisfaction of this need is presumed to function as a protective factor in couple conflict, thereby contributing to relationship maintenance (Goldman and Greenberg, 2013; Greenberg and Goldman, 2008).

Evidence for assumption 1

EFT-C's theoretical claims on the importance of *attachment needs* in intimate relationships are largely supported within the couple research literature. Insecure attachment to the partner has been frequently associated with relationship dysfunctioning (see Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007 for an overview), including lower levels of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy (e.g., Davila and Bradbury, 2001; Keelan *et al*., 1994; Treboux *et al*., 2004). As compared to securely attached couples, insecurely attached couples also report more conflict and less stable relationships (i.e., higher breakup/separation rates, shorter relationship duration: Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick and Davis, 1994; Treboux *et al*., 2004). Further, partner responsiveness and emotional engagement – as main characteristics of a partner satisfying the other partner's attachment needs – are key predictors of relationship quality and divorce (Gottman, 1994a; Huston *et al*., 2001; Johnson, 2004a).

The couple research literature contains little published research specifically investigating the role of *identity needs* in couple functioning. Some indirect evidence, however, may be derived from research on identity-related concepts. For instance, the finding that partners seek mutual approval within their relationship (Murray *et al*., 2000) and incorporate their partner's perception of their qualities and capacities into their own identity (Aron *et al*., 1995) may provide partial support

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for the idea of partners' crucial role in forming and maintaining each other's identity. Furthermore, partners who perceive less acceptance and positive regard by their partner, are found to feel less loved by their partner and are less satisfied with their relationship over time (Murray *et al*., 2001, 2006). Evidence also comes from studies on mutual influence or equality in couples and self-esteem, which may also be considered as manifestations of maintaining one's identity. Balanced mutual influence or equal power within couples was found to be associated with greater intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Knudson-Martin, 2013; Oyamot *et al*., 2010; Steil, 1997). Finally, high individual self-esteem was predictive of higher levels of relationship satisfaction in the long term (Erol and Orth, 2013; Orth *et al*., 2012).

To the authors' knowledge, no research has already explicitly examined what role *attraction and liking needs*, as conceptualized by Greenberg and Goldman, play in relationship outcomes. However, this type of relational needs has been conceptually linked by Greenberg and Goldman (2008) to relationship phenomena like intimacy, affection, love, and attraction, which have been broadly and reliably related to relationship maintenance in previous studies (e.g., Mark and Herbenick, 2014; Sangrador and Yela, 2000; Sprecher, 1999).

Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude that attachment (needs) have been shown to be broadly associated with relationship outcomes, whereas empirical evidence for identity and attraction needs in couples only indirectly derives from fundamental research on conceptually associated phenomena (e.g., self-esteem, power, love) in intimate relationships.

Assumption 2: Unmet needs lead to specific negative emotions in partners

According to the two EFT-C approaches included in our narrative literature review, partners react in predictable emotional ways when their needs are unmet by their partner. First, so-called primary emotions, which are one's most spontaneous and original responses to unmet needs, become activated. These emotions are difficult to tolerate and make the person vulnerable. As a result, they often remain unexpressed and therefore unacknowledged. At other times, they are turned into expressed, so-called secondary, emotions. These reactive emotions are individuals' defensive responses to and efforts to cope

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with their primary emotions (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Greenberg and Safran, 1987).

Within Johnson's approach (2004a), threats to attachment needs are assumed to evoke primary emotions such as sadness and fear in the deprived partner, which could be concealed by the expression of anger (i.e., secondary emotion). This emotional sequence resulting from unmet attachment needs is also described by Greenberg and Goldman (2008). The latter also specify the negative emotions resulting from partners' identity need struggles. The lack of being validated and respected by one's partner mainly leads to primary emotions of shame at diminishment and fear of loss of control, and more overt secondary emotions of anger and contempt. Whereas frustration of the needs for attachment and identity clearly induces distressing emotions, threats to attraction and liking needs especially entail a lack of positive emotions, which makes relationships less flourishing but not necessarily conflictual and distressing (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008).

Because distressed partners are not likely to articulate their primary emotions, EFT-C therapists are trained to help them to downregulate their expressed secondary emotions and to facilitate the identification and expression of their underlying, primary emotions to their partner (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004a).

Evidence for assumption 2

The needs-emotion association. Within current emotion theories, the *general idea* that negative emotions are elicited by unmet needs is widely accepted. In particular, according to appraisal theories, emotions result from an evaluation of the environment in light of one's concerns (personal needs, goals, or values) and their primary function is to signal if there is a (mis)match between the situation and any of these concerns (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Moors *et al*., 2013; Scherer and Ellsworth, 2009). As such, negative emotions act as alarms when obstruction is detected and thereby inform partners about the satisfaction status of their needs (Carver and Scheier, 1990; Frijda, 1986; Moors, 2007; Oatley and Johnson-Laird, 1987). In addition to their signal function, emotions are also said to have a communicative function, in the sense that they not only signal to oneself, but also to one's partner that needs are being frustrated within the relationship (Berscheid, 1983; Izard, 1971; Parkinson, 1995).

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Other need perspectives, like Self-Determination Theory, mention that negative emotions, such as anxiety, grief, and anger are typical responses to need frustration (Ryan and Deci, 2000). By the same token, research on relationship needs demonstrates that partners whose needs are less satisfied, generally experience more negative emotions and less positive emotions (Le and Agnew, 2001; Patrick *et al*., 2007).

Specific unmet needs lead to specific negative emotions. Quite some evidence can be found in the couple research literature on *specific* emotions resulting from unmet attachment needs (unmet attachment needs → sadness/fear → anger) as outlined by both EFT-C's approaches. More specifically, some studies document the occurrence of sadness, anxiety, anger when partners' attachment needs are unmet (see Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). People were found to experience more sadness and anger in the days after a relational breakup (Sbarra and Emery, 2005). Furthermore, higher levels of sadness, anxiety, and anger are reported after being separated from the partner due to war or work concerns (Vormbrock, 1993). Rejection by one's partner (after divorce or during negative interactions) is also associated with depressive symptoms, which could be considered as a composite of anger, sadness, and anxiety (Ayduk *et al*., 2001; Finch *et al*., 1999; Mearns, 1991). By the same token, experimental research has demonstrated that people who perceive a low level of partner responsiveness experience a higher fear response in reaction to threats (Coan *et al*., 2013).

The couple research literature contains little documented research on partners' specific emotions resulting from identity struggles (unmet identity needs → shame/fear → anger/contempt). Some evidence supporting this emotional sequence could be derived from one study showing that hurtful events caused by one's partner (comprising several identity threats like undermining one's self-worth and self-esteem) give rise to feelings of shame, being hurt, sadness, anger, and, to a lesser extent, fear (Feeney, 2005). Research on equity further suggests that feeling underbenefitted by one's partner is associated with the experience of anger as well as sadness (Guerrero *et al*., 2008; Sprecher, 2001).

What about existing findings from emotion research? First of all it should be noted that within the contemporary emotion literature, the idea of specific negative emotions following from specific unmet needs, as put forward by EFT-C, is not widely accepted (e.g., Ekman, 1992;

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Ellsworth, 2013; Roseman and Smith, 2001; Scherer, 2009; Tracy, 2014). Instead, these theories state that neither the situation per se, nor the need per se, but instead the appraisal of the situation in light of one's needs is important in determining the kind of an emotion. For example, when important needs (independent of their particular content) are in immediate danger and action has to be quickly undertaken (independent of the specific situation), the appraisal dimension 'urgency' (Frijda, 1986) will be high. In case of high urgency, emotions such as fear are likely to arise, whereas emotions such as sadness will be associated with low urgency appraisals (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003). Empirically, there is abundant evidence for appraisal theories, demonstrating that specific appraisal patterns, and not the type of need that is frustrated, differentiate between specific emotions (e.g., van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2002).

Our literature review also pointed at some theorists nuancing this perspective by arguing that some types of needs are typically more related to some emotions than others. For instance, Scherer (1988) suggested that a mismatch with self-esteem (conceptually related to identity needs) is more likely to elicit anger, whereas a mismatch with safety needs (conceptually related to attachment needs) is more plausible to provoke fear. Despite this theoretical differentiation, emotion research has thus far not demonstrated the particular links between attachment or identity needs on the one hand and specific emotions such as anger, shame, fear as predicted by EFT-C, on the other hand.

Primary emotions lead to secondary emotions. As appraisals are thought to be crucial in emotion differentiation (as described above: Ellsworth, 2013; Scherer, 2009), the hypothesized sequence in terms of primary and secondary emotions is hardly supported within the emotion literature. Instead, many current emotion theories state that every emotion can be replaced by any other emotion, depending on the specific additional appraisals that are made (Ellsworth, 2013; Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003). For example, anger can develop into fear as the situation is not, or no longer, appraised as possible to cope with (Ellsworth and Scherer, 2003). This idea of cognitive reappraisal is further well-documented by neuroimaging studies of emotion regulation strategies (see Ochsner and Gross, 2005, for an overview).

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Conclusion

In sum, both theoretical and empirical arguments from the emotion and couple research literature, support the general idea that unmet needs produce negative emotions, as outlined by existing EFT-Cs. However, the specific associations outlined by both types of EFT-C, as well as the hypothesized sequence of primary and secondary emotions, do receive little conceptual/empirical support within the current emotion literature. Nevertheless, for specific emotions resulting from unmet attachment needs, evidence has been found in the couple research literature.

Assumption 3: Specific negative emotions, accompanying unmet needs, give rise to specific negative interaction cycles between partners

Both approaches to EFT-Cs argue that people's emotions, especially their reactive secondary emotions, lead to destructive behaviours towards the partner in an attempt to cope with and to protect against need frustration. The partner will consequently react to these behaviours in a defensive way, which maintains the first partner's reactive emotions and associated behaviours (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004a, 2005). As a result, partners get stuck in negative vicious circles, further reinforcing the frustration of each other's needs and undermining the relationship (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004a).

In Johnson's therapy model (2004a, 2008), attachment insecurity accompanied by reactive anger is described to lead to demand-withdrawal, mutual demand, and mutual withdrawal interactional cycles. These cycles are anchored within attachment theory in which demand behaviour is seen as resulting from anger and as being part of protest against separation, and aimed at increasing the partner's availability and responsiveness (Bowlby, 1969). One partner pursues emotional closeness by blaming, criticizing, and controlling the other partner, and the latter either seeks distance or withdraws as a way of emotional protection (demand-withdrawal) or reacts with a counterattack (demand-demand). As attachment needs remain frustrated by such interactions, partners mutually reinforce each other's behaviour and become stuck in one of these negative interactional cycles (Johnson, 2004a, 2008). Over time, the demanding partner may stop his/her desperate attempts to elicit a response from the withdrawing

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partner and also withdraws, which results in a mutual withdrawal pattern (withdrawal-withdrawal).

In Greenberg and Goldman's (2008) therapy model, a distinction is made between behavioural patterns situated on the so-called affiliation dimension (closeness vs. distance) and those on the so-called influence dimension (dominance vs. submissiveness) (Benjamin, 1996; Leary, 1957). Similar to Johnson's approach, negative cycles following on attachment struggles are situated on the affiliation axis (varying from closeness to distance). The influence dimension comprises negative interaction cycles, mainly involving anger and contempt, which result from unmet identity needs. The most common of these negative interaction cycles is dominance-submissiveness in which one partner tries to preserve his/her identity and to coerce acceptance by trying to control and dominate the other partner, while the latter complies and submits. The more the latter engages in passive, submissive behaviour, the more the other partner takes control, resulting in less and less identity-validating interactions. This dominance-submissiveness may eventually evolve into interaction cycles in which both partners either fight for the lead (dominant-dominant) or want to convince the other partner that they are the weakest (submissive-submissive).

EFT-C therapists thus help couples to recognize and de-escalate these negative interaction cycles and the accompanying reactive secondary emotions. Subsequently, therapists assist couples in creating new patterns of positive interactions by accessing and expressing unacknowledged primary adaptive emotions and, after a reprocessing of the emotional experiences, to re-negotiate both partners' interactional positions (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 1999, 2004a; Johnson *et al*., 2005).

Evidence for assumption 3

Negative emotions and interaction cycles. Several studies in the couple research literature support the association between negative emotions in general and conflict behaviour (e.g., Gottman, 1994a, 1994b, 2011; Verhofstadt *et al*., 2005). Moreover, one's experience or perception of harsh emotions in the partner (i.e., anger and irritation) leads to more negative communication (e.g., defensiveness, criticism) and less positive (e.g., constructive discussion) communication in the couple (Sanford, 2007). Some studies also show that emotions like anger, sadness, and fear are specifically related to demand-withdrawal cycles in

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couples (Knobloch-Fedders *et al*., 2014; Papp *et al*., 2009). Furthermore, couples of which one partner was depressed reported more mutual withdrawal than non-clinical couples (Lemmens *et al*., 2007). Associations between specific negative emotions and other types of interaction cycles (e.g., demand-demand) remain unexamined in the couple research literature.

EFT-C's *general* notion about emotions as the engine of one's behaviour is also compatible with some emotion theories. According to these theories, emotions are considered as mental states that motivate people towards specific actions and interactions by means of action tendencies and bodily reactions (e.g., Roseman, 2011; Smith and Lazarus, 1990; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2006). However, other theorists (e.g., Moors, 2009) nuance this causal assumption as they argue that action tendencies and expressive behaviour are components of emotion and therefore cannot be seen as consequences of emotions.

Also regarding the *specific* associations between emotions and behaviours, as outlined by EFT-C, some theoretical debate is going on in the emotion literature. For instance, contemporary appraisal theories (Scherer, 2009; Moors, 2014) and psychological constructivist theories (Barrett, 2012; Russell, 2003) argue that a specific emotion label (e.g., fear) is not uniquely related to a specific behaviour (e.g., withdrawing). However, others found evidence for some emotions (or emotion labels) being more associated with particular action tendencies and behaviours than others (e.g., Kuppens *et al*., 2003). For instance, anger has found to be more strongly related with tendencies to move against or attack someone (e.g., Frijda *et al*., 1989; Roseman, 2011; Roseman *et al*., 1994) and to be more associated with approach than withdrawal behaviours (Harmon-Jones, 2003). On the contrary, contempt proved to be more related to behaviour aimed at moving other people away, for instance, by denigrating them (Fischer and Roseman, 2007), which resembles dominant behaviour described in EFT-Cs.

Unmet needs and interaction cycles. Regarding the link between partners' need frustration and a couple's interaction cycles, couple research shows an association between insecure attachment (needs) to the partner and problematic conflict resolution (see Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Insecurely attached couples tend to report more demand-withdrawal and mutual withdrawal in their relationship as compared with securely attached couples (Domingue and Mollen, 2009).

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Insecure partners have also been found to use more coercion and verbal aggression, tactics related to demand behaviour (Feeney, 1994; Senchak and Leonard, 1992). However, and in contrast with the EFT-C framework, a more insecure attachment style is not only linked to more demand and withdraw behaviours but also to more dominant behaviour (Babcock *et al*., 2000; Creasey and Ladd, 2005) and to the use of complementary obliging strategies (Shi, 2003). As far as we know there is no empirical research relating identity threats to dominant-submissive interaction cycles in couples.

Conclusion

Taken together, there are both theoretical and empirical grounds coming from the couple and emotion literature for EFT-C's general idea of partners' negative emotions being linked to couples' interaction patterns. For the associations between specific emotions and demand-withdraw/dominant-submissive cycles, little theoretical and empirical support can be found. As an important exception, the couple research literature provides evidence for the specific emotions related to demand-withdrawal. Regarding the association between unmet needs and interaction cycles, it should be noted that rather inconsistent evidence is found for the association between unmet attachment needs and demand-withdrawal, whereas dominant submissive cycles resulting from unmet identity needs has not yet been researched.

Discussion

First, we can conclude that the *broad interpretation* of the three dynamics that characterize distressed couples, as outlined by EFT-Cs, is largely supported within the couple and/or emotion literature. That is, the idea of partners' unmet needs leading to relationship conflict/distress and to negative emotions, as well as the idea of negative emotions giving rise to interaction cycles, is generally accepted at the theoretical and empirical level within the couple and emotion literature.

Second, more direct empirical evidence is currently available for Johnson's approach (2004a) than for Greenberg and Goldman's (2008) approach. This is – at least to some extent – due to the fact that Johnson's approach is strongly anchored in attachment theory, an overarching theoretical framework that received systematic and rigorous examination outside the couple therapy literature as well.

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Multiple disciplines (e.g., family psychology, emotion research) have studied attachment within intimate relationships, thereby providing converging evidence for Johnson's general idea of attachment needs being central in our understanding of couple distress. Equal support is therefore available for the part of Greenberg and Goldman's model that focuses on attachment. Greenberg and Goldman's assumptions on the role of identity and attraction needs, on the other hand, have rarely been the topic of investigation in fundamental research. A lack of research to promote Greenberg and Goldman's assumptions is of course different from falsification of these assumptions so future research should systematically evaluate the importance of identity and attraction needs as well.

Moreover, it should be noted that the (in)directly demonstrated importance of attachment, identity and attraction/liking needs does not exclude the possibility that the fulfilment or frustration of other relational needs may also be of importance in understanding relationship distress. Also other needs perspectives, developed within the broader psychological literature, such as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT: Deci and Ryan, 2000) receive growing empirical evidence. SDT states that the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness has to be fulfilled in intimate relationships in order to form high quality relationships (Deci and Ryan, 2014). As the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are found to be universal human needs (as shown by cross-cultural studies, e.g., Vansteenkiste *et al*., 2006), and existing studies underscore their relevance in predicting relationship outcomes – higher levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Patrick *et al*., 2007; Uysal *et al*., 2012; Vanhee *et al*., in press), less conflict and better conflict resolution (Patrick *et al*., 2007; Vanhee *et al*., 2018), and higher levels of support seeking during emotional experiences (Ryan *et al*., 2005) – it may be possible that these relational needs are currently disregarded in existing EFT-Cs. Therefore, a challenge for both EFT-C researchers and practitioners will be to reconsider the current assumptions and practice of EFT-C in light of other theoretical perspectives on need satisfaction/frustration in couples.

By the same token, the reviewed evidence for demand-withdrawal patterns resulting from unmet attachment needs does not preclude that these patterns may also be the expression of couples' attempts at dealing with unmet identity needs. Theoretically, it is assumed that the partner whose needs are frustrated, independent of the type of

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need, will desire change from the other partner (Christensen and Heavey, 1990). Indeed, both clinical observation and empirical research show that partners who are in the so-called agent of change position typically display demanding behaviour (such as complaining and pressuring for change: Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Heavey *et al*., 1993), irrespective of the required area of change (Verhofstadt *et al*., 2005). The possibility that frustration of needs other than solely attachment needs may lead to demand and/or withdrawal cycles, should be investigated more thoroughly to avoid the risk of tackling the interaction cycle itself in therapy, thereby trying to solve the symptom (i.e., demand and/or withdrawal cycle) but not the cause (i.e., specific need that is frustrated) (Vanhee *et al*., 2018).

Third, although the couple and emotion literature largely support the *general* idea of unmet needs leading to negative emotions and negative emotions leading to interaction cycles, empirical grounds for the *specific* associations between them (e.g., unmet identity needs → shame/fear → anger/contempt) are rather mixed or non-existent. In fact, few studies are available that actually test these specific predictions. Therefore, a systematic and rigorous analysis of the specific needs-emotions-behaviours sequence, as outlined by EFT-Cs, is warranted. For instance, future research should also focus on exploring potential gender differences in these specific associations (e.g., Parker *et al*., 2012). At the moment, available theoretical and empirical evidence does underscore the importance of exploring and addressing the broad range of negative emotions in couples and not only the specific emotions outlined by both EFT-Cs.

Finally, as the current couple and emotion literature provides no straightforward theoretical and empirical support for the hypothesized sequence of primary and secondary emotions, which is central to both approaches, more systematic research into this issue is warranted. As appraisals are crucial in emotion differentiation, it might be more interesting to focus on this component in therapy, in addition to the emotion word (e.g., anger) per se.

Next to appraisals, emotions further consist of bodily reactions, action tendencies, motoric expressions, and feelings, which can be labelled with emotion words (Moors, 2009). Some influential emotion theories, such as contemporary appraisal theories (Moors, 2014; Scherer, 2009) and psychological constructivist theories (Barrett, 2006; Russell, 2003) do not assume fixed, coherent sets of components for each emotion. Therefore, it might be interesting to

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investigate whether and how particular unmet needs are associated with specific emotion components and how these components are related to interaction cycles.

Conclusion

Our analysis definitely provides empirical and theoretical support for, at least some of, EFT-C's assumptions on the origins of couple distress. However, a lack of specific and systematic research into important issues hampers a conclusive review about the empirical validity of EFT-C's assumptions. Future research should therefore subject these assumptions, some of which are largely theoretically based, to rigorous empirical testing. Important issues within Greenberg and colleagues' approach are – to our knowledge – largely unexamined, but also some of the specific assumptions made by Johnson need to be the focus of systematic examination. More research can further contribute to the validation of EFT-C's theoretical underpinnings and to the efficacy of our efforts to treat relationship distress.

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