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Corresponding author:

Viktorija Čepukienė

viktorija.cepukiene@vdu.lt

Author Affiliation:

Vytautas Magnus University.

Emotional Intimacy in Romantic Relationships: Associations with Differentiation of Self, Partner Attachment, and Emotion Regulation – A Systematic Review

Čepukienė, V; Pociūtė, G.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**Support** - This systematic review received no specific funding or financial support.**Review Stage at time of this submission** - The review has not yet started.**Conflicts of interest** - None declared.**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY202680055**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 13 August 2026 and was last updated on 13 August 2026.**INTRODUCTION**

Review question / Objective This systematic review aims to synthesize evidence on the associations of emotional intimacy with partner attachment, differentiation of self, and emotion regulation in romantic relationships and, where supported by the evidence, to develop an integrative conceptual model of these associations. The review will address the following questions:

- What are the associations between emotional intimacy and partner attachment, differentiation of self, and emotion regulation in romantic relationships?
- What additional variables, including mediators and moderators, are examined in the associations between partner attachment, differentiation of self, emotion regulation, and emotional intimacy?
- What data collection methods and measurement instruments are used to assess emotional intimacy, partner attachment, differentiation of self, and emotion regulation in romantic relationships?

Rationale Existing research has examined differentiation of self, partner attachment, and emotion regulation in relation to various aspects of relationship functioning. However, these constructs have largely been investigated separately and within different theoretical frameworks, leaving evidence regarding their associations with emotional intimacy fragmented. Drawing on Reis and Shaver's (1988) intimacy process model, Bowen family systems theory, and attachment theory, this systematic review seeks to integrate evidence across these perspectives and provide a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of how individual partners' characteristics are associated with emotional intimacy in romantic relationships.

Although originating from different theoretical traditions, differentiation of self, attachment, and emotion regulation are conceptually interconnected. Both Bowen family systems theory and attachment theory emphasize, in different ways, the regulation of emotions within close relationships. Moreover, differentiation of self,

attachment, and emotion regulation may be associated with different but interrelated components of the intimacy process, including self-disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness. Examining these constructs within a common framework may therefore provide a more integrated understanding of emotional intimacy and the individual characteristics associated with its development and maintenance. Phillips et al. (2025) recently highlighted the need for further research on the antecedents of low emotional intimacy, underscoring the need for a more systematic understanding of factors associated with emotional intimacy. To our knowledge, no previous systematic review has synthesized evidence on the associations of differentiation of self, partner attachment, and emotion regulation with emotional intimacy in romantic relationships. The present review will address this gap by systematically synthesizing (1) the associations between these three constructs and emotional intimacy, (2) additional variables, including potential mediators and moderators, examined in relation to these associations, and (3) the methods and measurement instruments used to assess the constructs of interest.

Condition being studied This review does not address a health condition or disease, but rather a relational construct - emotional intimacy in romantic relationships, defined as the partners' perception of emotional closeness to another.

METHODS

Search strategy A systematic literature search will be conducted in EBSCO (APA PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycTests, and OpenDissertations), Scopus, and Web of Science. Google Scholar will be used as an additional source for identifying grey literature. The search strategy will consist of three separate searches, each combining terms related to romantic relationships and emotional intimacy with one of the three constructs of interest: (1) differentiation of self, (2) partner attachment, and (3) emotion regulation. Within each search, terms within each concept block will be combined using the Boolean operator OR, while the concept blocks will be combined using AND. The search syntax will be adapted to the requirements of each database. Search 1: Emotional intimacy and differentiation of self:

(couple* OR partner* OR dyad* OR marriage OR marital relationship* OR romantic relationship* OR romantic partner* OR intimate relationship* OR couple relationship* OR dating OR spouse* OR

committed relationship* OR long-term relationship* OR intimate partner*)

AND (intimacy OR emotional intimacy OR relational intimacy OR relationship intimacy OR partner intimacy OR intimacy process model OR emotional closeness OR closeness OR marital intimacy)

AND (differentiation of the self OR differentiation of self OR self-differentiation)

Search 2: Emotional intimacy and partner attachment:

(couple* OR partner* OR dyad* OR marriage OR marital relationship* OR romantic relationship* OR romantic partner* OR intimate relationship* OR couple relationship* OR dating OR spouse* OR committed relationship* OR long-term relationship* OR intimate partner*)

AND (intimacy OR emotional intimacy OR relational intimacy OR relationship intimacy OR partner intimacy OR intimacy process model OR emotional closeness OR closeness)

AND (attachment OR attachment style OR attachment anxiety OR attachment avoidance OR romantic attachment OR attachment security OR insecure attachment OR adult attachment OR attachment to partner OR partner attachment OR adult romantic attachment OR attachment orientation OR attachment dimensions OR anxious attachment OR avoidant attachment)

Search 3: Emotional intimacy and emotion regulation:

(couple* OR partner* OR dyad* OR marriage OR marital relationship* OR romantic relationship* OR romantic partner* OR intimate relationship* OR couple relationship* OR dating OR spouse* OR committed relationship* OR long-term relationship* OR intimate partner*)

AND (intimacy OR emotional intimacy OR relational intimacy OR relationship intimacy OR partner intimacy OR intimacy process model OR emotional closeness OR closeness)

AND (emotion* regulat* OR affect regulation OR intrapersonal emotion regulation OR interpersonal emotion regulation OR emotion* dysregulation).

Participant or population The population of interest is adults in romantic relationships (couples/partners), with no exclusions based on ethnicity or age, regardless of sexual orientation or the stage of their romantic relationship.

Intervention Not applicable.

Comparator Not applicable.

Study designs to be included Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, including dyadic designs

(e.g., studies using the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model [APIM]) and other relevant quantitative research designs.

Eligibility criteria Inclusion criteria:

1. The study included couples in romantic relationships or at least one partner of a romantic couple.
2. The study examined emotional intimacy and its association with at least one of the following constructs: differentiation of self, attachment to one's partner, or emotional regulation.
3. The study was a quantitative empirical study.
4. The article was published in English or Lithuanian, as these are the languages spoken by the researchers.
5. Studies examining “intimacy” will also be included when their theoretical conceptualization and operationalization are consistent with the definition of emotional intimacy adopted in this review, that is, when intimacy refers to perceived emotional closeness between romantic partners. [GP1.1]

Exclusion criteria:

1. The study did not examine romantic relationships or interactions between romantic partners.
2. The study focused on a conceptually distinct form of intimacy or relationship functioning, including sexual satisfaction/sexual intimacy, marital satisfaction only, relationship satisfaction only, family intimacy, or parent–child intimacy.
3. Emotional intimacy was not assessed as a distinct construct, or separate data for the emotional intimacy component could not be extracted from a broader measure of intimacy.
4. The study did not examine the association between emotional intimacy and at least one of the following constructs: differentiation of self, attachment to one's partner, or emotional regulation.
5. The study was qualitative, a systematic review, or a meta-analysis.
6. The article was published in a language other than English or Lithuanian.

Information sources EBSCOhost (APA PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycTests, and OpenDissertations), Scopus, and Web of Science will be searched for relevant studies. Google Scholar will additionally be searched to identify relevant grey literature. The reference lists of all studies included in the systematic review will also be screened to identify additional eligible studies.

Main outcome(s) The main outcome of this systematic review is emotional intimacy in

romantic relationships, broadly defined as the experience or perception of emotional closeness, connection, and mutual understanding between romantic partners.

Given the conceptual overlap and inconsistent terminology surrounding intimacy and emotional intimacy, studies using the broader term intimacy will also be eligible when the theoretical conceptualization and operationalization of the construct are consistent with emotional intimacy as defined in this review. Eligibility will therefore be determined based on the conceptual content and operationalization of the construct rather than solely on the terminology used by the study authors. Measures assessing broader constructs will be eligible only when emotional intimacy is assessed and reported as a distinct dimension or subscale.

For each included study, the conceptualization and operationalization of emotional intimacy will be extracted and reported, including the theoretical framework or definition provided by the authors and the measurement instrument used. Conceptualizations may be based on established theoretical frameworks, including but not limited to Reis and Shaver's interpersonal process model of intimacy, Sternberg's triangular theory of love, the PAIR (Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships) framework, or the authors' own conceptualizations.

Emotional intimacy will be considered a main outcome of interest, regardless of the specific instrument used to assess it and whether it is treated as a dependent variable, predictor, or correlate in the original study, provided it is assessed as a distinct construct consistent with the conceptual definition adopted in this review. For each study, the measurement instrument, study design (e.g., cross-sectional or longitudinal), and reported reliability estimate(s) for the emotional intimacy measure (e.g., Cronbach's α , McDonald's ω) will also be extracted and reported.

Additional outcome(s) The three main additional outcomes of interest are differentiation of self, partner attachment, and emotion regulation, which will be examined in relation to emotional intimacy. For each construct, the measurement instrument used and reported reliability estimate(s) will be extracted and reported. Unlike emotional intimacy, the theoretical conceptualization of these constructs will not be systematically categorized. The associations between differentiation of self, partner attachment, emotion regulation, and emotional intimacy will be extracted and reported, including the statistical estimates provided by the original studies (e.g., correlation and regression coefficients, effect sizes, and actor and partner

effects in dyadic analyses), together with statistical significance where reported.

Additional variables examined in relation to the associations between differentiation of self, partner attachment, emotion regulation, and emotional intimacy will also be extracted where relevant. These may include additional predictors or correlates and, particularly, variables examined as potential mediators or moderators. The inclusion of these variables will allow a broader synthesis of factors that may help explain the associations between the main constructs of interest and emotional intimacy.

Data management Records retrieved from the electronic databases will be imported into Rayyan, which will be used for duplicate identification and management, title and abstract screening, full-text screening, and data extraction. Potential duplicates identified by Rayyan will be reviewed and resolved manually when automatic duplicate resolution is not available or appropriate. Screening decisions and reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage will be recorded in Rayyan. Data from eligible studies will be extracted using a predefined data extraction form developed prior to the review. The extracted data will include study and sample characteristics, measurement instruments, analytical methods, associations between the constructs of interest and corresponding effect estimates, mediators and moderators, actor-partner effects where applicable, and methodological quality scores. Extracted data will subsequently be exported and organized in a structured spreadsheet for synthesis and reporting.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis The methodological quality of the included primary studies will be assessed using the Quality Assessment Criteria and Scoring Guidelines adapted from Kmet et al. (2004). Ten criteria applicable to the observational and correlational studies included in this review will be assessed. Each criterion will be rated as 2 (criterion fully met), 1 (criterion partially met), or 0 (criterion not met). A total methodological quality score will be calculated for each study by summing the individual criterion scores, with a maximum possible score of 20; higher scores will indicate higher methodological quality. Quality assessment will be conducted independently by two reviewers. Any disagreements will be resolved through discussion and consensus.

Strategy of data synthesis A narrative synthesis approach will be used. Findings will be synthesized separately for the associations of emotional

intimacy with differentiation of self, partner attachment, and emotion regulation. The direction, magnitude, and statistical significance of the reported associations will be summarized, taking into account study design and methodological quality. Where reported, mediating and moderating variables and actor-partner effects will also be synthesized. Measurement approaches and instruments used to assess the main constructs will be summarized descriptively. Given the anticipated heterogeneity in study designs, measures, and statistical analyses, a quantitative meta-analysis is not currently planned; however, its feasibility will be considered if a sufficient number of methodologically comparable studies is identified.

Subgroup analysis Formal subgroup analyses are not planned, as the primary synthesis will be narrative. If a quantitative meta-analysis proves feasible, subgroup analyses may be considered depending on the availability and comparability of data.

Sensitivity analysis Formal statistical sensitivity analyses are not planned, as the primary synthesis will be narrative. If a quantitative meta-analysis proves feasible, appropriate sensitivity analyses will be considered depending on the available data.

Language restriction The review will be restricted to studies published in English or Lithuanian.

Country(ies) involved Lithuania.

Keywords Differentiation of Self, Partner Attachment, Emotion Regulation, Emotional Intimacy, Romantic Relationships.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Viktorija Čepukienė.
Email: viktorija.cepukiene@vdu.lt
Author 2 - Gabrielė Pociūtė.
Email: gabriele.pociute@vdu.lt