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Chapter 22

In-Pair Divestment

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Abstract

How do in-pair obstacles and difficulties affect the intensity of love? Why do people at some points of their romantic relationships emotionally disinvest? And also, does a reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings always result in relationship breakup? Core assumptions of emotional intensity theory (EIT, Brehm, 1999) suggest that feelings of love vary in strength according to an adaptive 'energy conservation' principle (Richter, 2013; Silvestrini & Gendolla, 2019; Silvia & Brehm, 2001). To save energy, romantic partners automatically adapt the intensity of their feelings to the *minimum* level needed to overcome the obstacles and difficulties the couple encounters daily (e.g., reciprocal partners' flaws, relational stress, perceived risk of breakup), because *small* relationship obstacles and difficulties only demand the investment of correspondingly *small* quantities of motivational/emotional resources to be surmounted. As a consequence, romantic feelings appear to diminish when obstacles are almost absent and, by contrast, to augment when obstacles grow stronger—with emotional strength reflecting the magnitude of what challenges the stability of the relationship. This specific *fine-tuning* of emotion intensity holds up, however, only to the point where maintaining the relationship is still worth the effort. Beyond this point, actual in-pair divestment occurs (Donato *et al*., 2018; Miron *et al*., 2009; Sciara & Pantaleo, 2018), because any further investment of energy would represent a useless (i.e., *non-functional*) waste of energy. In adopting the perspective of EIT, this chapter will review the most relevant empirical evidence on romantic relationships in light of a unitary, single-process explanation that reconciles past conflicting findings, while also addressing new theoretical and practical implications for contemporary romantic partnerships.

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In-Pair Divestment

People commonly consider in-pair divestment as the main signal of a romantic relationship's breakup. According to core assumptions of emotional intensity theory (EIT, Brehm, 1999), however, a reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings may not necessarily represent the first step of an imminent dissolution but rather an *adaptive* response in stable couples who face relatively small difficulties. At a closer look, a reduction in romantic feelings may result from a *functional* process that leads the couple to adjust reciprocal emotional intensity to the *minimum* level needed to maintain the relationship. According to EIT, in fact, such a reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings obeys an energy conservation principle, whereby *small* relationship obstacles and difficulties will only require the investment of correspondingly *small* quantities of motivational/emotional resources to be surmounted—this resulting, of course, in an apparent reduction in the intensity of those romantic feelings (i.e., the drop). From a functional point of view, by obeying such an energy conservation principle the emotional/motivational system efficiently allows the organism to save precious and vital resources to be employed later and/or in different activities.

In this sense, emotional disengagement and breakup are not necessarily contiguous, even if they represent similar outcomes of the same process. In this chapter, we will illustrate how this process works, consider why such a reflex-like lessening and adaptation of emotional intensity may be functional for the relationship, and discuss when in-pair divestment becomes a synonym for relationship breakup.

1. What is emotional divestment?

In-pair divestment is a reduction in the intensity of affect towards the partner that may involve romantic feelings, such as love, affection, and reciprocal commitment (Gonzaga *et al.,* 2001; Kelley, 1983; Miron *et al*. 2009; 2012), as well as time spent together, shared pursuit of goals, or resource sharing (cf. Felmlee *et al*., 1990; Meuwly & Schoebi, 2017). At some point of

their relationship, romantic partners may appear to be less interested in each other (Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993, 1996; Snyder & Regts, 1982). Most frequently, they experience a reduction in the intensity of passion and romance (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Hatfield *et al*., 1982). In more severe cases, however, partners *fall out of love*, with reciprocal daily life becoming increasingly dissatisfying and stressful (Kayser, 1993). When it comes to married couples, this outcome has been called "marital disaffection" (Barry *et al*., 2008; Kayser, 1993), to refer to a specific phase in marriage characterized by a gradual and progressive loss of emotional attachment, accompanied by a growing sense of *indifference* towards the spouse—i.e., a sensation that apparently represents the opposite of feelings of love (e.g., Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Emotional divestment also concerns negative feelings as it reduces not only the intensity of love, but also the strength of jealousy, guilt, and even anger (Gottman, 1999). The result, then, is a widespread flattening of any kind of emotional intensity, whereby former emotions give way to indifference that, at a cognitive and behavioral level, soon translates into active forms of distancing between partners (Barry *et al.*, 2019; Barry *et al.*, 2008; Hess, 2002).

For all of the above reasons, people often consider emotional divestment as one of the first steps of relationship dissolution; and research supports this idea as well (Barry *et al.*, 2019). Data from two separate studies by VanderDrift and colleagues (2009) highlight the critical role of dissolution considerations in mediating reduced relationship commitment (i.e., a form of emotional divestment), on the one hand, and the enactment of *actual* leave behavior, on the other. More specifically, building on the behavioral, goal, and implementation intention literatures (e.g., Ajzen, 1985; Armitage & Conner, 2001; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Gollwitzer, 1996; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), VanderDrift and colleagues predicted and found that psychologically *salient* (i.e., consciously accessible to mind) dissolution considerations were indeed linking reduced commitment (expressed as strength of psychological and material investment in the relationship) to leave behaviors (expressed as the proportion of participants who were no longer in the relationship

after a time period of 4 months). These results, especially if considered alone, add to the idea that emotional divestment precedes relationship dissolution.

Also, scholars describe affective disengagement as a crucial part of relationship decline, from which few couples recover, and that usually ends with relationship termination (Barry *et al*., 2008; Gottman, 1999). Also in line with other commonly mentioned reasons for relationship breakup, habitually reported by former married couples, this phase usually leads to an actual relationship dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Baxter, 1986; Sprecher, 1994). Further invoked reasons that cause spouses to terminate their relationship include labeling the marriage as stale and boring, preferring alternative stimuli, and a diffuse feeling that partners are neglectful of their spouses' needs (Kayser & Rao, 2006; see also Betzig, 1989).

A reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings, however, does not necessarily result in relationship breakup. Changes and fluctuation in the intensity of love and passion usually occur within romantic relationships (Hatfield *et al*., 2008; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Hatfield *et al*., 1982). Sometimes, a substantial decrease in partners' emotional intensity appears to be *'natural'* within the couple, as it takes the form of a decay due to the mere passing of time—or, at least, of an emotional waning not constituting in itself a threat to the relationship (Lieberman & Long, 2018).

A stable couple in which the partners have been together for several years represents a good example in this respect. Let us imagine what these two partners may be experiencing, emotionally, at some point of their relationship. We can easily imagine that the partners may have found some form of inner stability and balance; perhaps they no longer live stimulating experiences and events, but they do not have considerable troubles to face in their shared daily life, either. Thus, it is plausible that the intensity of their reciprocal feelings of love, attraction, and passion, but also of jealousy and anger, may appear to have been reduced if compared to their initial intensity, when the two partners were at the beginning of their union. In other words, as relationships grow older, romantic feelings tend to give way to less passionate, but more pragmatic bonds (e.g., *pragmatic love*, Kelley, 1983; see also the concept of *companionate love*, Hatfield *et al*., 2008, in this respect;

Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Hatfield *et al*., 1982). From the above example, we can easily assume that a high *intensity* of passion and love might no longer be essential for the stability of a relationship after some time has passed from the start of the union (Lieberman & Long, 2018). At the same time, this reduction in the intensity of passionate love may not constitute a sufficient reason for partners to break up (Schoenfeld, 2013).

Also from an evolutionary perspective, and perhaps even more cogently from such a theoretical point of view, the above reduction in partners' feelings would be 'normal.' According to classic evolutionary analyses, feelings such as love evolved to serve several functions—such as providing sexual access, displaying commitment, or promoting relationship exclusivity (Buss, 2019; Buss, 1988)—that a stable couple, whose members have reached some form of enduring relationship, does not need any more or, at least, not with the same initial urgency and intensity. In our example above, the bond that stable partners developed in the course of their years-long relationship is established and relatively permanent, so that all of the primary functions of their initial romantic feelings (e.g., sexual access, commitment, exclusivity) appear now to be of less importance, as the couple has already reached the main goals (e.g., the pursuing of a satisfying and stable relationship) served by those functions (Lieberman & Long, 2018).

1.1. A natural reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings

The above reasoning leads us to an important derivation: when a couple has found its stability, and lives in an absence of threatening obstacles, high intensity of love becomes *superfluous*. Previous research (e.g., Hatfield *et al*., 2008; Lieberman & Long, 2018) has shown that *intense* romantic feelings, as for instance passionate love, are crucial in the first phase of the relationship—i.e., when the partners are dating, when the couple is at its very beginning, or when a relational stability is yet to be found. In all of these circumstances, intense love represents the fundamental drive that encourages individuals to direct their energy and resources toward the primary common goals of (a) selecting the mate, and (b) cultivating the relationship (Fisher, 2006; Fisher *et al*., 2005; Leckman *et al.*, 2006), because by securing those goals romantic partners ensure

sexual reproduction (Buss, 1988, 2006). Partners within stable long-term relationships, however, do not need to experience the same levels of passionate love to make their relationship endure (e.g., Hatfield *et al*., 2008). For this reason, reciprocal romantic feelings naturally tend to decrease with the passing of time (e.g., Schoenfeld, 2013)—this representing an outcome that finds support not only in research spelled out above, but also in our daily experiences.

The same, of course, should happen in the case of *negative* romantic feelings. Passionate love is not the only feeling that decreases in intensity. From an evolutionary perspective, jealousy is another good example of an emotion that may no longer be essential if the couple is stable and does not face obstacles and threats to the relationship. Jealousy is defined as the emotional reaction to a threat that puts partners at risk of losing their relationship (Buss, 2019; Buss & Haselton, 2005). Then, if in a couple there are no signs and indicators that might otherwise bring the partners to suspect infidelity—such as the presence of romantic rivals—then high intensity of jealousy is unessential. In other words, a reduction in emotional intensity seems to be justified both with respect to negative and positive feelings.

Nevertheless, *none* of the described 'natural' declines in strength of emotional intensity is a signal *in itself* of an imminent dissolution. We should then distinguish between two different instances that qualify the reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings. On the one hand, the emotional divestment that results in a breakup; on the other, a more *functional* reduction of feelings that occurs in normal relationships, and even seems to make them last. At some point of their romantic relationships, people begin to emotionally disinvest, without feeling compelled to end the relationship. In our view, this is intriguing. Why should that be the case? To what extent, and how, are in-pair obstacles and difficulties—or even the clear *absence* of such obstacles and difficulties—responsible for such a lessening in the intensity of romantic feelings? And, most importantly, how can we predict and explain what kind of emotional divestment will occur in specific couples and romantic relationships?

2. The causes of in-pair divestment: The perspective of emotional intensity theory

Several studies have addressed what causes romantic partners to emotionally disinvest. As common sense would suggest, in-pair obstacles and difficulties are among the most cited motivations in research. Marital conflicts and stressful events, such as repeated attempts at controlling the partner's deeds and actions, a lack of intimacy, workaholic tendencies, financial problems, or a variety of pressures from the social context, all represent barriers that demonstrated to lead directly to marital disaffection (Kayser, 1993; 1996; Kayser & Rao, 2006; Robinson, Flowers, & Kok-Mun, 2006; Sadati, Honarmand, & Soodani, 2015). Also, when considering unmarried couples, a host of obstacles—such as a lack of social support, social disapproval, or parental interference (e.g., Sinclair & Ellithorpe, 2014; Sinclair *et al.*, 2014; see also Levinger, 1999; Rusbult, 1980)—diminishes the intensity of reciprocal romantic feelings within the couple.

A growing body of empirical evidence, however, also shows the opposite effects. The same obstacles that lead partners to reduce romantic feelings become, in some circumstances, *beneficial* for the couple. A moderate degree of parental interference (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972; see also Driscoll, 2014), a certain amount of social disapproval or lack of support by the family (Felmlee, 2001; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher, 2011), as well as living in marginalized relationships (e.g., homosexual, interracial, age-gap, or consensually non-monogamous relationships, Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), are all examples of obstacles that, under some conditions, may *enhance* attraction and commitment between romantic partners. A reduction in emotional intensity might not derive from the fact that couples are facing obstacles and barriers. Rather, it may originate in the fact that the couple is gradually and 'naturally' adapting the intensity of romantic feelings and emotions to the magnitude of those obstacles and barriers—an adaptation that may occur in the *absence* of substantial difficulties. Put differently, the idea that romantic emotional divestment is caused by in-pair obstacles and barriers appears insufficient to explain the observed phenomena.

In this respect, the perspective of EIT (Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Brummett 1998; Brehm & Miron, 2006) provides a coherent and integrative theoretical explanation for the above conflicting

findings. According to the theory, a relatively *'low intensity of love'*, usually observed in stable couples, and *'actual relationship breakup'*, are two different outcomes of the same process. They are only apparently similar, as in both cases partners evidently show a *reduction* in the intensity of the affect they manifest within the relationship. These two conditions, however, are causally determined by different combinations of theoretically unambiguous and well-specified factors, and may lead to different consequences.

2.1. Emotional intensity theory

Brehm's emotional intensity theory (EIT, Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Brummett 1998; Brehm & Miron, 2006) rests on the assumption that emotions have a *motivational function*. This is because any emotional state—whether it is a basic emotion, an empathetic reaction, or even a basic, sensory affect—motivates specific classes of behavior that originally solved precise adaptive problems (e.g., Brehm *et al*., 2009; see also Al-Shawaf *et al.*, 2016, for a review). The resulting behavior depends on the goal of the emotion. Anger, for instance, usually urges the person to aggress against whomever or whatever instigated the emotion, while sadness urges the person to withdraw (Lazarus, 1991). Even when its primary goal is unclear, an emotion involves an *urge* to act (or to refrain from acting) in specific ways. Thus, as *emotions function as motivational states*, emotional intensity must be affected by the same factors that affect motivational intensity (Brehm, 1999; see also Miron & Brehm, 2012, on EIT's cardiovascular implications for emotional states).

As demonstrated by more than three decades of research on motivational intensity, motivational systems are designed to save energy (see the core assumptions of *motivational intensity theory*, MIT, in this respect: Brehm & Self, 1989; Gendolla & Wright, 2005; see also the original theoretical formulation on core principles of 'motivational suppression': Brehm, 1975; for reviews: Gendolla, Wright, & Richter, 2019; Richter, Gendolla, & Wright, 2016; Richter, 2013; Silvestrini & Gendolla, 2019; Silvestrini et al., in press; Silvia & Brehm, 2001). When people strive to achieve a goal, they do not mobilize all the energy at their disposal, but only the amount *just needed* to overcome the obstacles they encounter while performing a given action. Thus, great

obstacles will cause people to exert relatively high motivational effort, while small obstacles will let them exert correspondingly less effort, even when the pursued goal is important to them. Also, people invest motivational energy only when the required effort is justified by the importance they attribute to the goal; when the goal is not attractive, small obstacles will be sufficient to cause them to give up and disinvest. In other words, the greater the obstacles, the more energy (corresponding to greater motivational intensity) will be mobilized by the motivational system, up to the point where obstacles become too great to be surmounted, and the importance attributed to the goal no longer justifies further energy expenditure. From this perspective, motivational intensity is determined by two factors: the *importance* of reaching an outcome (i.e., the goal), and the *obstacles* that stand between the person and the attainment of the outcome. In this process, the importance of the goal sets the maximum *potential* effort a person will be willing to exert to overcome the obstacles, while the perceived magnitude of the obstacles will determine the *actual* effort the person will exert (Brehm, 1975; Brehm & Self, 1989; Brehm *et al*., 1983; for reviews and qualifications: Gendolla, Wright, & Richter, 2019; Richter, Brinkmann, & Carbajal, 2016; Richter, Gendolla, & Wright, 2016; R. A. Wright, 2008; Wright & Pantaleo, 2013).

In light of the fundamental analogy that links emotions to motivational processes, variations in the intensity of emotions must obey the same energy conservation principle that controls the intensity of motivation (e.g., Richter, 2013; Silvestrini & Gendolla, 2019; Silvia & Brehm, 2001). The intensity of an emotion is thus determined by a combination of two factors: (a) the *importance* of the event that instigated the emotion (e.g., a painful event)—also understandable as the importance of experiencing that specific emotion at a given strength to secure the attainment of the emotional primary goal (e.g., the urgency of withdrawing into oneself as determined by the feeling of sadness)—and (b) the magnitude of *deterrence* to that emotional expression—i.e., the counter-force exerted by any obstacle or barrier qualifying as a reason for not feeling the emotion (e.g., receiving a gift, as a counter-force to sadness, as established in Brehm, Brummett, & Harvey,

1999). To clarify and better understand this process, let us look at the theoretical curve described in Figure 1.

As in the case of motivation, the importance attributed to the event that instigated the emotion sets the maximum level of emotional intensity, i.e., the so-called *potential intensity* (see Figure 1). As depicted in the figure, the level of potential intensity works as a *threshold* under which actual emotional intensity will be controlled by a single factor: the magnitude of 'deterrence'. Thus, when the event that instigated the emotion is important to the person, and he/she therefore acutely feels the urge to express the emotion (e.g., the sadness resulting from failure at the final examination for graduation), then emotional intensity must be only determined by obstacles, with the emotion (e.g., sadness) growing more intense as the obstacles to the possibility of feeling and/or expressing that emotion increase in magnitude (e.g., with the increasing value of the gift—i.e., the counterforce or *deterrent*—the person has just received). Both in our example and more generally, this happens because feeling and expressing that given emotion is experienced as worthy and necessary, and its urgency justifies the mobilization of the energy needed to express/enact the emotion *despite* its deterrents. Emotional intensity will then mirror the magnitude of deterrence, with the person automatically investing only the quantity of energy strictly needed to counteract the magnitude of the deterrent. This amounts to experiencing/expressing low emotional intensity when the deterrent is little, and comparatively higher emotional intensity when the deterrent becomes bigger (*low* to *medium deterrence* conditions; Figure 1).

Remarkably, however, obstacles will cause emotional intensity to augment only up to the point where strength of deterrence outweighs the importance of the event that instigated the emotion (in our example, receiving a gift of inestimable value). After this point (*high deterrence* condition; Figure 1), when deterrents become too great and a further emotional increase is no longer justified by the importance of expressing/enacting the emotion, emotional intensity drops to zero (e.g., the person will no longer experience sadness, nor will feel any further impulse towards the enactment of sadness-motivated behaviors).

Finally, in a circumstance in which deterrents are unknown or unspecified (e.g., no gift has been given to contrast sadness, or the value of the gift is unknown), the intensity of the emotional state will correspond to the importance/strength of the instigating event (this is the *unknown deterrence* condition, as depicted in Figure 1). According to the theory, keeping a high level of emotional intensity when people are unaware of what obstacle/barrier will contrast the emotion they are feeling has an adaptive value: experiencing the highest intensity possible will let the person endure and overcome counterforces of any magnitude, at least within the limits of his/her maximum potential intensity (Brehm, 1999; Silvia & Brehm, 2001).

In sum, according to EIT, the intensity of an emotional state varies as a *cubic* function of increasing levels of deterrence (Figure 1). Emotional intensity will thus be: (1) relatively strong in the presence of unknown deterrents; (2) substantially reduced in the presence of relatively weak deterrents; (3) relatively strong in the presence of moderately strong deterrents; and (4) drastically reduced in the presence of too strong deterrents (i.e., deterrents that either objectively or subjectively cannot be overcome).

To date, several experiments have documented the predicted cubic effects of deterrence on the intensity of emotions and affective states, all reporting the same pattern of results (see the *observed results* in Figure 1). In particular, EIT's predictions have been substantiated with respect to emotional and affective states such as happiness (e.g., Miron *et al.*, 2007), sadness (e.g., Brehm *et al.*, 1999; Silvia & Brehm, 2001), anger (e.g., Miron *et al.*, 2008), and positive and negative basic sensory affect (Brehm, Miron, & Miller, 2009). On a more socio-relational level, the same cubic effects of deterrence have been documented for prejudiced and attitude-related affect (Fuegen & Brehm, 2004; Miron *et al.*, 2011; Pantaleo & Contu, 2021; 2022), political justification (Contu *et al.*, 2021), as well as for affective social identification (Pantaleo *et al.*, 2014). Also, the same cubic trend has been reported even with respect to the intensity of emotions such as collective guilt (Schmitt *et al.*, 2008), vicarious empathy (Pantaleo, 2011), and the affective component of intentions (Miron & Pantaleo, 2010, for a review).

In the domain of romantic relationships, a series of experimental/controlled studies designed to test predictions of EIT, confirmed the anticipated *cubic* effects of deterrence on the intensity of partners' feelings (e.g., Miron *et al*., 2009; Sciara & Pantaleo, 2018). These experiments not only have provided further and converging support for EIT, but also a unitary and coherent theoretical explanation for all the *contrasting* findings that have been accumulating on the causes of in-pair divestment (e.g., Driscoll *et al.*, 1972; Driscoll, 2014; Felmlee, 2001; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Sinclair & Ellithorpe, 2014). In the next section, we will review and discuss the most relevant empirical evidence at our disposal in this respect.

2.2. The surprising effects of obstacles on the intensity of romantic feelings

According to EIT (Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Brummett 1998; Brehm & Miron, 2006), since feelings of affect towards a person are motivational states (see Brehm *et al*., 2009), the intensity of love, affection, attraction, or any other feeling towards the romantic partner must be controlled by the same factors that control the intensity of motivation, namely by the magnitude of *obstacles* or any other *counterforces*, renamed *deterrents* in EIT's theoretical language, to those feelings of affect (see also Brehm & Brummett, 1998, on the emotional control of behavior). Therefore, any reason *not* to feel a specific affect will qualify as a *deterrent* to that affect, as a dynamic counterforce able to either *augment* or *reduce* the intensity of the affect (Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Brummett, 1998; Fuegen & Brehm, 2004). In the context of romantic relationships several different in-pair obstacles and barriers have proven to act systematically and precisely as predicted by EIT, that is as deterrents to romantic feelings (e.g., Miron *et al*., 2009; Sciara & Pantaleo, 2018; Donato *et al*., 2018; see also Miron *et al*., 2012; R. A. Wright *et al*., 1985).

Miron and her colleagues were the first to provide empirical support for what they termed 'the surprising effects' of obstacles on the intensity of romantic feelings (Miron *et al*., 2009). To test the hypothesis that the severity of *partners' flaws* can deter romantic feelings according to the *cubic* function predicted by EIT, they created an experimental procedure in which the increasing magnitude of partner's flaws (i.e., the deterrent) was experimentally manipulated. Working with

young partners and lovers, the researchers first instigated feelings of positive affect and commitment towards the partner/beloved. Then, they assigned participants to one of four conditions of increasing magnitude of deterrence—i.e., the four indispensable conditions for detecting the hypothesized cubic effect of deterrence magnitude (control *vs*. minor *vs*. medium *vs*. major flaws). Deterrence was manipulated in two-steps, by first asking participants (1) to name some positive characteristics of their partner/significant other—this amounting to the experimental induction, through an explicit recall procedure, of positive affect towards the partner (i.e., the affect to be deterred)—and, right after, (2) to list and rank-order three important *negative* partner's characteristics (i.e., partner' flaws). Depending on experimental (i.e., *deterrence*) conditions, participants were thus asked to elaborate (explain or give examples) either (a) on the most important (*high deterrence*), (b) the second most important (*moderate deterrence*), or (c) the third most important *negative* partner's characteristic (*low deterrence*). In the two control conditions, participants either limited themselves (only) to the listing of positive partner's characteristics, or to listing both positive *and* negative characteristics *without* any further explicit focus, elaboration, or reference to those characteristics. Finally, the experimenters measured the intensity of feelings towards the romantic partner/beloved. Across two experiments, the researchers were able to show that romantic positive affect and commitment towards the partner was *intense* in the two control conditions; paradoxically *reduced* by a minor salient partner's flaw; maintained *intense* by a moderately important flaw; and again *reduced* by an important flaw. This pattern of results perfectly corresponds to the cubic trend originally predicted by the theory and depicted in Figure 1.

A variety of subsequent experiments, all testing the effects of distinct deterrents, replicated these surprising though predictable effects. Reysen and Katzarska-Miller (2013), for instance, tested whether the manipulated *degree of reciprocation* of a potential partner acted as a deterrent to romantic feelings by producing cubic effects of deterrence on the intensity of attraction (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013). To test their hypothesis, the researchers asked participants to imagine a potential romantic partner who reciprocated either a strong, moderate, weak, or unspecified

personal feeling of attraction (this latter condition instantiating the control condition of 'reciprocation unmentioned'). Results revealed that potential partners' reciprocation of attraction acted as a deterrent to participants' actual intensity of attraction towards the potential partner. Specifically, the intensity of attraction varied as a cubic function of increasing degrees of reciprocation: it was *intense* when reciprocation was unspecified; paradoxically *reduced* when participants' feelings of attraction were highly reciprocated; *intense,* again, when attraction was only moderately reciprocated; and eventually substantially *reduced* when attraction was, instead, only scarcely reciprocated. Again, this pattern of observed results fits perfectly the pattern of expected results, as one can easily anticipate from Figure 1.

Some years later, Sciara and Pantaleo (2018) tested EIT predictions from different theoretical and empirical angles by experimentally manipulating the *risk of relationship breakup* of one's own romantic relationship, whereby the 'manipulated risk' represented the counterforce (deterrent) to feelings of romantic affect and commitment towards the partner. The procedure admitted only partners who were in actual medium- to long-term romantic relationships and, after bringing each participant to focus on *positive* aspects of his or her relationship (this amounting to the *instigation* of positive romantic emotions), then asked participants to complete a test which was introduced as essential to provide them a later (false) feedback on their *own* personal risk of terminating the relationship. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four usual experimental conditions of increasing deterrence, that is to conditions in which they, respectively, did not receive any feedback (*unknown* risk of breakup condition), received positive feedback (*low* risk of breakup), received a less comforting feedback (*medium* risk of breakup), or received negative feedback (*high* risk of breakup). The results were, again, counterintuitive and—one more time—perfectly congruent with EIT's theoretical predictions. Participants' feelings of affect and commitment towards their respective romantic partners resulted *strong* when the risk of breakup was not mentioned; substantially *reduced* when the risk was low; *strong*, again, when the risk was moderate; and, eventually, significantly *reduced* again when the risk was high. In other words, once

more, the intensity of romantic feelings followed exactly—and systematically—the cubic pattern predicted by the theory (see Figure 1).

Donato and colleagues (2018) replicated these findings with one more experiment, this time showing that even the recall of *stressful events* can act as a deterrent of romantic affect towards the partner (Donato *et al*., 2018). By implementing the established experimental paradigm and design described above, they experimentally manipulated stress (the deterrent) across four distinct levels of intensity by asking young partners—all involved in real romantic relationships—to recall three stressful events in their current romantic relationship, each characterized by a different burden of stress for the relationship. Participants in the control condition did not receive any further instructions, while participants in the remaining three experimental conditions were asked to focus, and further elaborate, either on the least stressful event ('low stress' condition), on the moderately stressful event ('moderate stress' condition), or on the most stressful event ('high stress' condition). In line with previous findings, results substantiated EIT's predictions: feelings of romantic affect resulted *strong* in the control condition, *reduced* in the 'low stress' condition, maintained *intense* in the 'moderate stress' condition, and eventually *reduced*, again, in the 'high stress condition' (again, a configuration of results perfectly in line with the pattern of results depicted in Figure 1). Recently, analogous deterrence effects of stress on the intensity of romantic affect have been replicated—with some further important qualifications—also among adults engaged in long-term romantic relationships (Sciara, Resta, Pirola, & Pantaleo, 2020).

A first consequence of the accumulating evidence described above is given by the possibility of interpreting the previous conflicting findings of in-pair obstacles on the intensity of romantic feelings in light of a *unitary*, *single-process explanation*. By adopting the perspective of EIT (Brehm, 1999), we can realize that obstacles and barriers—traditionally conceptualized as detrimental for in-pair feelings and the fate of the relationship (e.g., Levinger, 1999; Rusbult, 1980)—can function, rather, as 'motivators', and be even beneficial for partners' reciprocal feelings of romantic attachment (Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Self, 1989; H. F. Wright, 1937). In light of this

perspective, all of the *mixed* effects accidentally found by previous research—i.e., empirical evidence not purposely designed to test Brehm's EIT (e.g., Driscoll *et al*., 1972; Driscoll, 2014)—appear now to be plausible and coherent. As we have seen, the effects of obstacles on romantic feelings depend on a combination of detailed circumstances. As such, they can either systematically *decrease* emotional intensity (when obstacles are either too weak or exert an excessive deterrence effect), or even sharply *increase* the intensity of those feelings (when obstacles exert just a moderate deterrence effect; e.g., Miron *et al*., 2009, 2012; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013; Sciara & Pantaleo, 2018; Donato *et al*., 2018).

Moreover, EIT's conceptual lenses allow us to derive precise implications also for those previous models that, at a more theoretical level, have always considered obstacles and barriers as the main causes of in-pair emotional divestment. Rusbult's investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult *et al*., 2012; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), for instance, predicts that in-pair negative factors (i.e., low levels of satisfaction, the presence of viable alternatives to the relationship, and a few investments in the relationship) can be all antecedents of a *linear decrease* in the intensity of partners' romantic commitment. Similarly, the risk regulation model (RRM: Murray *et al*., 2006, 2008) predicts that the perceived risk of rejection (i.e., an in-pair barrier) should *impair* the strength of romantic cognitions and then *linearly reduce* romantic involvement (i.e., the stronger the barrier, the more pronounced the *lessening* of romantic feelings towards the partner). Therefore, from our perspective, both Rusbult's investment model and the RRM can neither predict nor explain the *drop* in the intensity of romantic feelings that has been repeatedly observed, instead, when partners face *only little obstacles* (e.g., Miron *et al*., 2009). This drop, as we have seen, shapes the *cubic* function predicted by the energy conservation principle, and is coherent with core assumptions of Brehm's EIT (Brehm & Self, 1989; Gendolla, Wright, & Richter, 2019; Richter, Gendolla, & Wright, 2016; see also Richter, 2015; Stanek & Richter, 2016).

Finally, a further relevant implication—and the most important for what concerns us here—is that, according to EIT, a substantial reduction in the intensity of romantic feelings can occur as a

result of *two* different theoretical conditions. The process as specified by EIT predicts that romantic partners will emotionally divest in two apparently similar cases which, in daily life, even risk to be mistaken for the same condition, as both view partners experiencing less involvement, love, attraction, and affection. In the first case, however, the person is facing obstacles of low magnitude to his/her romantic feelings and, for this reason, is *adapting* to a relatively 'low challenging' environment through emotional divestment (see the 'energy conservation principle'). In the second scenario, the person is instead facing obstacles beyond what the person can handle. For this reason, such big deterrents will make the person feel overwhelmed and, eventually, divest. In the next section, we will see why and how these two cases of in-pair divestment have different implications, and also can produce opposite consequences.

2.3. The energy conservation principle and its implications for romantic relationships

The basic assumption of EIT is the principle for which people would tend, both at a motivational and an emotional level, to save energy (i.e., the *energy conservation principle*; Brehm & Self, 1989; Brehm, 1999; Gendolla, Wright, & Richter, 2019; Richter, Gendolla, & Wright, 2016; see also Richter, 2015; Stanek & Richter, 2016). An early version of the theory described the process using an expression that leaves no room for misunderstanding, with the principle originally termed as the '*suppression of excess motivational energy*' (Brehm, 1975). Also within romantic relationships, researchers consistently observe a *fine-tuning* process for which romantic partners make the intensity of their reciprocal feelings correspond to the *minimum level* required to overcome reasons not to feel those feelings, i.e., the deterrents (Donato *et al*., 2018; Miron *et al*., 2009; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2013; Sciara & Pantaleo, 2018). From this point of view, the most surprising implication of this process might not be the fact that obstacles stimulate an increase in felt attraction and feelings of love (as notably remarked by Miron *et al*., 2009) but, instead, the consequent reduction in emotional feelings we observe when, in normal stable couples, there are no great obstacles to handle—one of our contentions in this chapter. Why do romantic feelings obey to an 'energy conservation' principle?

To reach the primary and ultimate goal of any romantic feeling such as jealousy, love, attraction, affection, commitment of *maintaining the relationship* over time, romantic partners spontaneously react emotionally by mirroring the magnitude of whatever challenges the stability of their relationship at a given time and, as long as the emotional investment is justified by the importance attributed to the beloved person. By adapting emotional intensity to the actual magnitude of obstacles, partners invest only the minimum amount of energy that is *sufficient* to overcome the challenge (i.e., the magnitude of the deterrent to romantic feelings). The primary advantage of such adaptation is that partners are allowed to invest, on the whole, *less* energy than they would without such an adaptation mechanism at work. This constant *saving* of energy and common emotional resources will allow the couple to invest (superior) amounts of energy only when effectively needed, to overcome (bigger) relational obstacles that are still both possible to surmount and also worth the effort. Conserved energy may, in fact, be used later when the perceived utility of energy expenditure is greatest (e.g., when a threat is unknown or moderate). This flexibility is clearly *functional* to make romantic relationships last. What are the central implications of such a functional emotional reduction for romantic relationships? And, perhaps most importantly, how can we predict actual relationship dissolution?

A first implication, in this respect, regards the difference between the consequences of (a) the functional in-pair divestment due to adaptation to a *low* deterrence magnitude, on the one hand, and (b) the emotional drop stemming from the depletion of potential emotional resources due to the couple's complete emotional 'surrender' in front of too *high* deterrence, on the other. In the first case, partners are not likely to break up, because in-pair conflicts, obstacles and barriers are almost absent and, for this reason, feelings are just *momentarily* reduced in strength. Such a reduction is justified when in-pair conflicts (i.e., the deterrents) remain circumscribed and not particularly demanding. Once the magnitude of deterrence grows stronger, however, partners will react by adjusting the emotional intensity of their romantic feelings to the challenges posed by the new relationship's demands (see Figure 1). Consider, for example, the case of a long-term marriage that

has been relatively stable for several years. In the absence of challenging obstacles—which would pose a threat to the stability of the relationship—partners should show a reduction in the intensity of love. This reduction, however, would only depend on the *absence* of challenging obstacles; if a new challenge emerges (e.g., an attractive new neighbor), the couple should promptly respond with an intensification of in-pair love and attraction that will help the partners to surmount the challenge. In this example, in other words, the partners' feelings are reduced only temporarily, and the couple is definitely far away from an actual relationship dissolution.

In the second case the scenario is turned around: partners have already drastically reduced their emotional investment almost to zero because in-pair problems and the difficulties they met in the past were already too great and well beyond the limit that the couple could successfully withstand. For this reason, if compared with the first case, in which greater obstacles were able to awaken romantic feelings, in the present situation greater obstacles would cause exactly the *opposite* consequences: dealing with challenges that are even more demanding than one can reasonably handle *would not make romantic feelings magically reappear.* In such a scenario, actual relationship dissolution is reasonably likely to occur.

To illustrate and elaborate further on this point, let us think about a couple in which the partners decided to remain together, forcibly, to raise their children. Great obstacles of the past, such as frequent and repeated relationship troubles, or incompatibility between the partners, may have all caused romantic feelings to rise excessively, such that they surpass the maximum allowed level of intensity, the level beyond which intense feelings of love are *no longer* functional and justified in the relationship. In such a scenario, romantic feelings would of course be *reduced* in intensity, exactly as with a long-term spouse, but for a different reason. In this second illustration, in fact, both partners have presumably reduced their feelings almost to zero *because of* the *too great obstacles* they were dealing with—not because of an absence of relevant challenges, or because of the mere passing of time. In such a scenario, obstacles of even greater magnitude (e.g., a new,

attractive neighbor) would only worsen the situation, with actual relationship breakup becoming increasingly more likely, if not unavoidable.

There is a further implication of our general reasoning on resource conservation, which follows directly from the consideration that the two conditions of in-pair divestment described above, due either to low *or* too high deterrence strength, are *by no means contiguous*. First, the two kinds of divestment within the couple are not necessarily sequential, because one condition does not determine the other, and vice versa. We cannot predict one reaction from the other, as those reactions simply stem, as we already know, from different crossings of two factors—the magnitude of deterrence (the obstacles) *and* the level of potential emotional intensity (i.e., the importance of the person who instigated the affect) (Figure 1). Second, moving from one kind of emotional divestment to the other should represent, at least, an infrequent event. This is because it is rather seldom that couples quickly move from situations in which they face 'very low' deterrence (e.g., just some little occasional quarrel) to situations in which they abruptly face 'very high' deterrence (e.g., reciprocal incompatibility on every front).

A third and final implication could help us guess what kind of in-pair divestment a given romantic relationship is facing. The reaction to obstacles in itself can be considered—at least potentially—as a fair indicator of which part of the Brehmian theoretical curve (Figure 1) the couple is dealing with at a certain time. Are the couple's feelings reacting to some *increasing* in-pair difficulties, obstacles and barriers? If yes, then we would infer that those feelings originate, probably, in the first left part of the theoretical curve, where emotional divestment is a *functional* reaction to low deterrence magnitude (see Figure 1). This not being the case, if the couple is *not* emotionally mirroring the magnitude of new, bigger in-pair obstacles, we would then have to infer that partners are finding themselves, *psychologically*, in the second right part of the curve, where emotional disengagement is, again, a *functional* reaction to too strong deterrents. To try to render these two different scenarios more graphic, let us think for a moment about a popular commonplace. It is frequent to hear that "a bit of jealousy is good for the couple", this meaning that

some occasional jealousy reactions are good indicators that the partner is still having feelings for the counterpart or is still feeling some romantic involvement. So, if the partner finds him-/herself in the first left part of the theoretical curve (i.e., the 'low deterrence' region in Figure 1), then some evidence of a possible betrayal will *stimulate* and rise an emotional reaction of jealousy. By contrast, however, if the partner finds him-/herself far away, toward the end of the second right part of the theoretical curve (i.e., in the too 'high deterrence' region), even the most unmistakable sign of betrayal will no longer touch the person, at least not in terms of jealousy or any other relationship-maintaining romantic feeling.

3. Implications and directions for future research and professional practice

Although numerous studies provided substantial support, in the past, for EIT's predictions, some important theoretical implications in the context of close relationships have never been spelled out or systematically tested yet and *are* in need of further investigation. To date, little research has explored the predicted effects of deterrence on the intensity of romantic *negative* feelings (e.g., jealousy, envy, and rancor). So far, only an experiment by Miron and colleagues (2009, Study 3) started to investigate the effects of deterrence on negative romantic emotions. In a gist, this experiment outlined how the increasing relevance of positive partner's *qualities* (i.e., the deterrent) shaped the intensity of *anger* within romantic couples so that, once instigated, anger was high in the control and moderate deterrence conditions, and significantly reduced in both the low and high deterrence conditions—a pattern conforming, again, to the predicted cubic trend depicted in Figure 1.

Also, at first glance, results such as those obtained by Miron and colleagues (2009, Study 3) could perhaps sound somewhat counterintuitive—like almost any other well-established hypothesis coming from EIT—but, at the same time, they may also prove extremely useful for a number of practical reasons. In the case of jealousy, for example, EIT would predict that one partner's—and/or any other persons' (friends, acquaintances, etc.)—benevolent attempts at *reassuring* and *comforting*

the other partner about his/her (perhaps mistaken) feelings of jealousy within the relationship would unintentionally (and *paradoxically*) act as *deterrents* to the strength of those feelings of jealousy, and alter its intensity accordingly, in line with the predicted cubic pattern. From results such as these, we—the community of researchers, professionals, counselors, practitioners, or any interested person—would learn that certain levels of 'reassurance' (i.e., those substantially corresponding to moderate deterrence) might (as predicted) surprisingly *augment* the partner's worries and, thereby, even be detrimental for the relationship. Such a discovery would of course not only lead researchers to deepen and expand their understanding of the dynamics of emotional regulation within the couple, but also let a vast array of psychological professionals be in a better—and well-documented/sustainable—position to efficiently help partners find their balance within the relationship. Further empirical testing of such and similar theoretical derivations, however, is needed.

Another aspect of the theory that would need further investigation regards the study of what determines the level, or threshold, of *potential* emotional intensity in general, and of romantic emotions in particular. As we have seen in the course of this chapter, EIT states that the threshold of potential intensity is a direct function of strength of emotional instigation, i.e., the subjective importance of whatever—or *whomever*, in the case of romantic feelings—instigated the emotion (Brehm, 1999). In this sense, the maximum *potential* level an emotion can reach (i.e., the threshold) is not fixed a priori, but is assumed to be a direct function of the subjective importance of the ultimate *goal* of a given romantic feeling (e.g., staying with the beloved person and maintaining the relationship over time). Although the theory unambiguously predicts such an upward/downward shift of potential intensity (i.e., the threshold), to date no study has yet tested this important facet of the theory—certainly not within the context of close/romantic relationships.

The reader can easily imagine how relevant such a new line of research could be. Let us imagine for a moment, what would happen if the ultimate goal of some reciprocal romantic feelings was *not* the maintenance of the relationship. What should happen if feelings of affection were no

longer directed at maintaining the relationship over time? What parallel implications would we then derive with respect to other kinds of dyadic relationships (e.g., casual dating) and, of course, with respect to related feelings of affect *not* directly oriented at maintaining the bond (e.g., mere physical attraction)? Further, what would happen to emotional intensity if a certain positive affect would aim at keeping two persons together (as it *should*) when, in reality, those two persons *must* stay together because the bond cannot be resolved for some other, external technical reason such as, for instance, in the case of co-parenting relationships? Similarly, what would happen in the case of parental affect towards one's child, that is when relationship maintenance is, to some extent, constantly ensured/secured, regardless of obstacles? Parents usually try hard for their offspring. Thus, if the goal of achieving a solid bond has already been reached and secured within the parent-child relationship, we would expect no special/unusual emotional reactions (i.e., any abrupt diminishing or intensification of emotions) as a sheer function of obstacles (i.e., deterrence magnitude), because those obstacles—in *those kinds* of relationships—no longer act as real psychological barriers to feelings of affect towards the other person (e.g., the child, in the case of the parental relationship).

Some evidence in this respect has already been collected in a recent study on the intensity of parental feelings of affect in parent-children relationships—more specifically, in a controlled experiment deliberately constructed to test some core predictions of EIT (1999) in the context of those specific parent-child relationships (Sciara *et al*., 2020). The authors assumed that the ultimate goal of affect was to maintain the relationship and, also, that parental relationships should be among the most difficult/impossible relationships to break (their maintenance should be relatively secured because the emotional goal of relationship maintenance has *already* been reached). In line with this reasoning, Sciara and colleagues (2020) found that traditional obstacles and relationship barriers, comprising various stressful events for the relationship, did *not* deter the intensity of parents' positive feelings of affection towards their own children (all parental feelings remained invariably intense). Again, however, future research should explore more systematically such new directions,

and possibly also clarify what for the moment, in our view, remains little more than a fascinating set of interrelated questions and stimulating hypotheses.

Aside from which particular aspects of the theory still need to be tested, a close reading of EIT (Brehm, 1999; Brehm & Brummett, 1998; Brehm & Miron, 2006) also suggests a number of practical implications that have the clear potential to benefit, in many respects, a vast array of professionals in the field of interpersonal relationships. A first implication in this respect regards, for instance, the possibility to practically determine and/or regulate the intensity of romantic affect between couples/partners by assessing those known (i.e., theoretically specified) parameters, or factors, which are central in shaping the intensity of partners' feelings: (a) the magnitude of *deterrence*, and (b) the level of *potential intensity* at which a given emotion can be experienced/expressed at its level of maximal intensity (i.e., the threshold of potential intensity). An accurate prediction of resultant variations in the intensity of reciprocal emotions, made on the basis of the above-identified factors, would enable professionals and couples to prevent unwanted negative and automatic consequences of the emotion regulation process, among which—of course—actual relationship breakup. In this respect, the theory represents a genuinely good guide, as it shows exactly which factors should be identified—and possibly controlled—to avoid the negative consequences of in-pair divestment or, more precisely, to prevent that kind of in-pair divestment that , in the end, typically leads partners to break up. Under EIT's theoretical guide, thus, interested professionals could venture to find out (and also help the couple to maintain) the best perfect *match* between partners' emotional *potential*, on the one hand, and the appropriate range of deterrence magnitude the couple is able to handle at a given time, on the other hand, without disengaging. Certainly not an easy task to accomplish but, for sure, a feasible enterprise.

Even when a certain couple appears to have already infringed the limit that usually brings them to definitive emotional divestment (i.e., the threshold of potential intensity), and begins to no longer be able to tolerate further increments in the magnitude of in-pair obstacles, EIT still lets us hope that—to use a common expression—"*all is not lost*". At a theoretical level, a couple that has

already drastically divested, perhaps after having significantly grappled with too great obstacles, still has the chance to *reverse* the process. What caused partners' reciprocal feelings of love to drop to a level of *minimum* intensity? There are at least two possible answers to this crucial question. First, "An insufficient level of potential intensity of feelings." In other words, if the threshold of potential intensity (i.e., importance attributed to the relationship and/or partner) would have hypothetically been just a little bit higher, then emotional intensity would have *not* dropped to zero, because it would have adapted to the intensity level necessary to *overcome* obstacles of great entity (and, of course, it would have theoretically made feelings of romantic attraction grow paradoxically stronger!). In such a case, a good solution to give the couple another chance would consist in intensifying partners' reciprocal levels of *potential* intensity, by emphasizing—and thereby heightening—the subjective importance of their respective mate (e.g., this could be achieved by bringing the partners to rediscover and consequently attach, again, more subjective value and positive qualities to the other person). In so doing, a new intensification of romantic feelings would be fully justified, even in the face of relatively strong obstacles. The couple would then not only merely survive, but even intensify reciprocal romantic strivings.

A second way to answer the question of 'What caused partners' feelings of love to drop to a *minimum* level of intensity' could consider, instead, the decisive role of in-pair obstacles. If, again in our hypothetical reasoning, obstacles had been just a little bit smaller than they were, then partners' feelings would have *not* dropped to zero: those feelings would have adapted in strength to the intensity level needed to overcome such (comparatively smaller) difficulties. In such a case, then, a good alternative and recommended solution would be to remove—or, at least, to try to adjust the perception of—the obstacles that caused reciprocal romantic feelings to encroach the limit of *potential* intensity (i.e., EIT's theoretical threshold; see Figure 1) and thereby visibly drop to a minimum level of intensity.

Before moving towards the conclusion of this chapter, we still need clarification on a further intriguing theoretical possibility, the chance of *inverting* the unfolding of the emotional intensity-

regulation process specified by EIT to bring romantic relationships to last longer than they normally would in normal/typical circumstances. The process described by EIT and in particular the emotional divestment that results from a drastic drop in emotional intensity, is an *adaptive* process (Brehm, 1999; Richter, 2013)—i.e., it evolved to prevent people wasting resources while they were striving to reach goals that were either *unattainable* or, else, *not worth* the effort. This means that, to some extent, also romantic breakups should be seen as *adaptive* outcomes of a functional process. In keeping with this reasoning, then, a clear advantage of adopting the perspective of EIT is the possibility to recognize those cases in which the process of energy mobilization is, instead, *not* functioning properly (i.e., in a non-adaptive way). In some cases, for example, misperceiving a certain situation by either *underestimating obstacles* or by *overestimating the importance* attributed to one's partner (or to the relationship) may directly lead a person to continue to invest *even when* such emotional investments are dysfunctional, deleterious and harmful both for the person and the relationship. Closely related to this, a better understanding of how the intensity of romantic feelings can be effectively regulated in specific circumstances, then, would help professionals also in preventing the unwanted effects of *extreme feelings* (i.e., either too feeble or too intense romantic feelings).

In this respect, researchers, as well as practitioners, counselors, and still other professionals, should all carefully consider the probable emergence of a parallel ironic side effect due to a rapid intensification of strivings and feelings within the couple. This effect amounts to an emotionally-driven *cognitive narrowing* of one's own perceptual and social abilities—a severe limitation to relational skills stemming from the sudden intensification of emotions (Easterbrook, 1959; Pantaleo *et al.*, 2014, p. 863; Silvia & Brehm, 2001). In such a scenario, an abrupt reduction in partners' reciprocal cognitive abilities, and related perspective-taking skills, is expected just when each member of the couple would do better, instead, to continue entertaining and bearing in mind the full array of standpoints, needs, desires, and requests made by the other partner *and* by the broader societal context/situation—an ability that normally guarantees relatively high flexibility in a

changing physical and social world (Pantaleo *et al.*, 2014; Silvia & Brehm, 2001). According to the theory of multiple perspectives (TMP, Pantaleo, 1997; Pantaleo & Wicklund, 2000; Wicklund & Pantaleo, 2012; Wicklund, 1999), such a strong and abrupt reduction in partners' capacity and competence to entertain a *multiplicity* of social standpoints and perspectives (i.e., the cognitive narrowing) is part of a so-called *orienting* reaction, a response that brings people to manifest social *'blindness'* vis-à-vis the different social perspectives, standpoints, and opinions typically present in the public arena (cf. Sciara et al., 2022). In our case, such an orienting reaction would bring us, the researchers, to observe both partners acting, thinking, and feeling in a social *vacuum*, as if they were *de facto* 'shielded' and isolated—by their own strong private goals and motivations—from other potential sources of influence or inspiration, even if those sources could turn out, one day, to be helpful to the couple. According to predictions of the theory of multiple perspectives (TMP), then, such an *orienting* reaction would easily bring the two partners to an unwanted forgetfulness and consequent paradoxical disregard of their reciprocal needs, desires, and declared preferences within the couple, as well as to a more general neglect of the broader societal perspective and related social input and suggestions (Pantaleo, 1997; Pantaleo & Wicklund, 2000, pp. 233-234; Wicklund & Pantaleo, 2012, pp. 364-367; see also Wicklund & Steins, 1996). This being the case, then, it would be true, once again—and this time also from a different theoretical angle—, that '(*strong*) love blinds.'

Lastly, professionals may find it useful to combine EIT's practical implications with more fine-grained assessments of the distinctive, idiosyncratic characteristics of the particular romantic relationship they are dealing with. Decades of research have constantly shown that people can be grouped easily in terms of some fundamental dispositional differences in the way in which they tend to perceive obstacles and other potential sources of stress (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). For this reason, any systematic (i.e., dispositional or character-related) *overestimation* vs. *underestimation* of in-pair obstacles and difficulties by side of romantic partners will interact with all of the predictions of Brehm's theory (i.e., the *cubic trend*, Brehm, 1999; see

Figure 1). In other words, each person will emotionally respond according to (a) the predictions of EIT *in combination* with (b) his/her personal tendencies in perceiving obstacles and barriers (see Brinkmann & Franzen, 2015; Gendolla, 2018; Gendolla, Brinkmann, & Richter, 2007; Richter, Gendolla, & Wright, 2016; Wright, 2014; Wright & Franklin, 2004; Wright, Mlynski, & Carbajal, 2019; and Wright & Pantaleo, 2013, for a rationale and reviews of analogous moderating factors affecting perception of obstacles and barriers from the perspective of MIT). Thus, a specific kind of emotional divestment (be it functional and transitory *vs*. drastic and radical) will happen depending on whether obstacles are, for whatever reason (e.g., personality, circumstances, or a combination thereof), *perceived* as 'too little' (i.e., unchallenging) or 'too great' (i.e., excessively challenging). Again, implementing the perspective offered by EIT also in the arena of romantic relationship will enormously help perceptive professionals—as any other interested scholar, of course—to responsibly identify those crucial factors that may, under circumstances, lead a particular couple to emotionally divest.

In sum, we are persuaded that EIT—together with a number of related research findings—may represent a clear, dependable, and integrative guide to anyone interested in emotional dynamics. In our view, this theory will easily keep the promise of bringing every interested person—scholars, researchers, professionals, practitioners, or any other genuinely attentive person worth his or her professional salt—to understand, with clarity and simplicity, the subtleties of emotional investment and regulation, and the dynamics that lie at the heart of different, yet unitary romantic and love processes.

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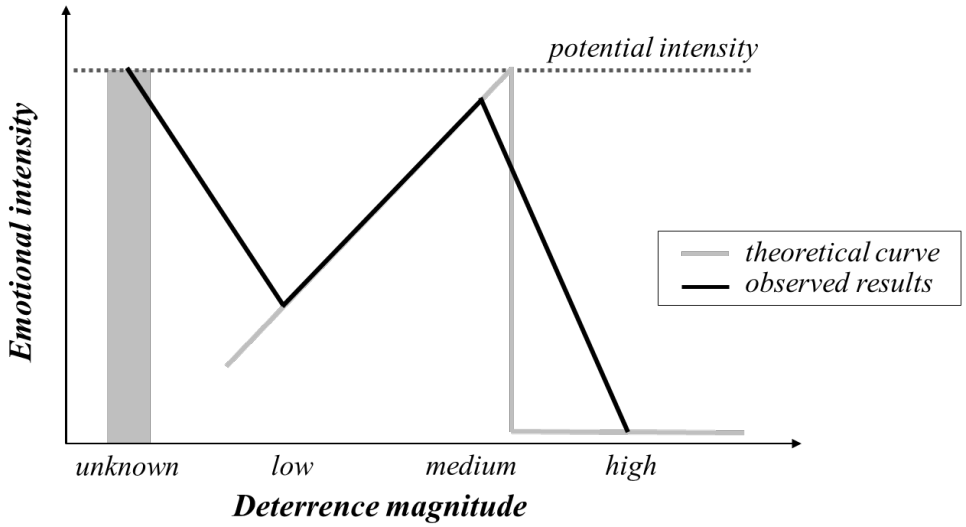

Figure 1. The effect of deterrence magnitude (unknown *vs*. low *vs*. medium *vs*. high) on the intensity of instigated emotions as predicted by EIT (*theoretical curve*) and as observed in results coming from studies designed to test the theory (*observed results*).