



# Couples: Conflict as an Avenue for Personal Agency and Change

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ALEXANDER RODRÍGUEZ BUSTAMANTE\*  
ALEXANDER OSPINA GARCÍA\*\*  
DUBIS MARCELA RINCÓN BARRETO\*\*\*

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**Abstract:** Objective. This article aims to offer a thoughtful examination of the relationship of couples as a platform that fosters the potential for personal agency and transformation. It acknowledges the individuals within these relationships as autonomous entities capable of managing strategies to reshape their subjectivity within the social context. Methodology. To achieve this, a review and categorization of relevant literature was conducted, structured into three sections: love in couple relationships, conflict within such relationships, and the potential for personal agency and change in couple dynamics. These sections serve as a demonstration of individual or collective autonomy often catalyzed by conflict. Results. The reflection concludes that adversity within relationships often births the potential for developing personal agency and instigating change. Individuals, when faced with challenges mobilize internal resources toward achieving a higher quality of life.

**Key words:** affectivity, relationships, individuality, culture.

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\* Professor at Universidad Católica Luis Amigó and PhD student in Education at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana. Luis Amigó Catholic University; Faculty of Social Sciences, health and well-being. Medellín, Colombia. E-mail: alexander.rodriguez@upb.edu.co, alexander.rodriguezbu@amigo.edu.co

 [orcid.org/0000-0001-6478-1414](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6478-1414) [Google Scholar](#)

\*\* Specialist in Family Therapy. Luis Amigó Catholic University. Medellín, Colombia. E-mail: Aospinago1@gmail.com

 [orcid.org/0000-0002-1089-7814](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1089-7814) [Google Scholar](#)

\*\*\* Professor at Universidad Católica Luis Amigó; Faculty of Social Sciences, health and well-being. Leader of the research group Pharmacodependence and other addictions. Medellín, Colombia. Email: dubis.rinconba@amigo.edu.co

 [orcid.org/0000-0002-8322-889X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8322-889X) [Google Scholar](#)

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## **Parejas. El conflicto como posibilidad de agencia para el cambio**

**Resumen:** Objetivo. Este artículo tiene como propósito presentar una reflexión sobre la relación de parejas como un escenario que posibilita la capacidad de agencia para el cambio, entendiendo que sus actores como sujetos en plenitud de su individualidad son gestores de estrategias transformadoras de su propia subjetividad inmersos en lo social. Metodología. Para esto fue necesaria la revisión y categorización de los textos en los cuales se presentan en tres apartados: el amor en la relación de pareja, el conflicto en la relación de pareja y la capacidad de agenciar el cambio en las relaciones de parejas, como una muestra de autonomía individual o colectiva movilizada por un conflicto. Resultados. La reflexión concluye que desde la dificultad emerge la posibilidad de desarrollar la capacidad de agencia para el cambio como una acción autónoma de los sujetos que deciden movilizar recursos para una mejor calidad de vida.

**Palabras clave:** afectividad, relación, individuo, cultura.

### **Introduction**

According to Giddens, the couple relationship thrives a mutually fulfilling and sexually rewarding partnership, deriving its strength from the emotional and sexual satisfaction experienced by its participants, culminating in confluent love (cited by Giraldo-Hurtado and Rodríguez-Bustamante, (2018, p. 18).

The couple relationship has historically captivated human attention and remains one of the most gratifying experiences in which individuals engage (Páez, 2006). Ancient Sumerian engravings dating back to 4,000 years B.C. depict romantic images and phrases dedicated to couples. Maureira (2011) portrays the couple relationship as a dynamic element within human connections, adapting to the nuances of its originating context. Consequently, studying the phenomenon of being a couple necessitates an understanding of the cultural and social backdrop in which individuals are shaped, along with the domain where both individuals occupy distinct roles contributing to their development within a Western context.

The following reflective analysis delves into the couple relationship as a platform for collective ‘we’ construction, emerging from the individuality declared by its members, rooted in an affective bond that undergoes conflicts, thereby stimulating autonomous actions leading to change. This text will explore three propositions, reinterpreting what has been conventionally been understood as stages within couple relationships and their binding elements: love within the couple relationship, outlining the affective construction inherent in today’s concept of couples and its implications; conflict within the couple relationship, serving as a site for mobilizing autonomous actions among members and constructing affective bonds; and the capacity to provoke change in couple relationships, indicative of individual or collective autonomy triggered by conflict.

## Discussion

### Love in a couple’s relationship

Idealized love responds to the human need for wholeness, the illusion of merging with another and the pursuit of a state of absolute contentment and tranquility (Molina Velásquez et al., 2009). A more realistic portrayal of love suggests an experience that acknowledges the void within each individual as a driving force for creation, exploration and a perpetual quest for existence (Bauman, 2015).

From this perspective, love embraces the prospect of loss as an undeniable reality, acknowledging the finite nature of experiences and regarding the aspiration for completeness as a fantasy, grounding individuals in an increasingly fluid world. The correlation between love and mortality validates such encounters as unique and even essential. Acceptance becomes the only recourse as evasion proves futile, affirming their singularity, inevitability and purpose. As expressed by Barrios and Pinto (2008), deconstructing the assumed certainties of ideal love could potentially lead to a love that is freer and less burdened by guilt—a love that does not lose significance upon termination and does not exhaust the lives of participants when it ceases to exist.

Addressing the uncertainty inherent in love and life—whose endpoint remains unknown—might facilitate a novel construct distinct from the idealized fusion with another. Embracing the unknown, perceiving risk as an avenue for learning, and acknowledging finality as life’s ultimate destiny without impeding our autonomy offers an experience of love that acknowledges its uniqueness and potential to renew us new with each encounter.

As noted by Barrios and Pinto (2008), love stands as one of the most complex issues in our society today, primarily because it remains elusive to understanding. Originating family structures often impart the notion that individuals should seek an

ideal love that completely fulfills their needs and expectations—a notion inherently flawed yet perfectly imperfect.

It is precisely this idealized conceptualization of love that engenders the anguish and culpability linked to its dissolution. The belief in complementarity, the notion of filling existential voids, and expecting the other to bring completeness to one's life through love initiates catastrophe from inception by assuming infinity, perpetual bliss, and attributing the unattainable power of constant fulfillment and satisfaction.

As White and Epston (1993) assert, 'To love is to legitimize,' signifying the act of acknowledging the existence of the other. Despite the sublimity of romantic love, it harbors and implicit invitation to sacrifice, as the ideal of fusion negates agency and autonomy. Consequently, a fear of loss emerges, compelling individuals to make numerous attempts to avoid abandonment, potentially leading to the dissolution of the subject's identity within the context of the relationship, forming a nucleus.

In a similar vein, De Cristóforis (2010) posits that the couple embodies a utopian pursuit to reclaim the lost paradise of the primal dyad—the bond between mother and child. 'You love me therefore I am,' epitomizing how a couple bestows identity upon individuals, with repeated acknowledgement, therefore, brings security.

If the yearning for eternal love could be detached from it, there might exist greater prospects to live it intensely and without guilt. While it might seem contradictory to embrace a love that acknowledges death as a possibility, it aligns more coherently with postmodern discourse. As Lyotard (1979) articulates, postmodernity is characterized by "the loss of belief, the collapse of the old certainties, where uncertainty and crisis seem to be the hallmark of the present age" (p. 50). Would it not be more beneficial, then, to construct a concept of love that diverges from absolute truths, such as love as completeness? What if love that could be lived without the obligation to perpetuate it—a love that does not demand the vanishing of its devotees or enforce sacrifices stemming from fear of abandonment?

A couple is a 'we' without necessitating fusion or erasure of the 'I'; instead, it embodies an acceptance of differences, imperfections, and the other. When acknowledging death as a potential (or rather, an inevitability), it does not connote the thanatic predominance highlighted by Eguiluz (2007) where "violence, irritation, hostility and confusion" dominate such relationships (p.11).

According to Bauman (2015), scarcely anything resembles death as much as fulfilled love. Each manifestation of either is distinct yet definitive, unique, irrevocable, and immediate. Each appearance emerges as a fresh beginning, arising from nothingness, from the obscurity of non-being, devoid of past or future (p. 17).

Following this line of thought, love embodies risk, akin to life itself, as articulated by Pinto-Tapia (2005): to love is to risk everything for the other, to reveal ourselves to gain validation. The risk is that they stop loving us, since if we love we leave the other free to choose" (p. 3). The imminent risk of life is its cessation—death.

In love, its risk is its cessation. In both experiences, according to Bauman (2015), we engage only once. Love never remains the same, much like the experience of death, which is also unique. Hence, according to the author, learning to love or to die remains impossible.

Ultimately, despite attempts to elucidate a more pragmatic way of loving, the undeniable reality persists that escaping the experience of love or evading the imminence of death is futile. Loving entails surrendering to an unknown fate, to a narrative of which we know naught but from which we learn in our attempts to construct it. We embrace life despite the certainty of death, reveling in its enjoyment, construction and reconstruction as necessary. Love, akin to life, is an ongoing construction. As Bauman (2015) aptly states, “Love does not find its meaning in the longing for things already done, complete and finished, but in the impulse to participate in the construction of those things” (p. 21).

### **Conflict in a Couple’s Relationship**

Regarding the couple relationship and the importance of assertive communication, It is imperative to acknowledge the necessity to transcend mere spoken words and tap into the realm of the felt word. Valdez et al. (2011) delineate the existence of biological, psycho-socio-cultural strategies deployed in the pursuit of sustaining or perpetuating the couple’s life. Within biological strategies, aspects such as procreation for species preservation, gregariousness and the quest for security and protection take precedence. Psychological orientations towards biology have centered on understanding and elucidating the organic underpinnings that elucidate various motivated behaviors, including love (Carpi et al., 2005). Maureira (2009) posits that couple love is clearly related to the motivational system, stemming from the pleasure derived from sex—a physiological need, rather than merely an emotion. Echoing this sentiment, Laso (2018) suggests that post-conflict, historic fissures in the bond surface, manifesting as a disjuncture post-rupture and separation.

In the psycho-socio-cultural sphere, a distinctive viewpoint emerges regarding conflicts within a couple’s relationship as a catalyst for fortification and maintenance of the partnership. This perspective diverges from the idealized cultural perception that a “healthy” couple should devoid of conflicts. Embracing conflict or crisis as an opportunity unveils new methods of bonding, unearths previously untapped resources, and imparts a series of lessons that enrich the couple’s future together.

Perhaps the cultural and political history, replete with truly violent conflicts, has instilled in us a perception of crises as realms of impossibility, fear and defeat. The tendency to perceive crises as something to evade has instigated a culture of fear surrounding the essential junctures of life, particularly in the context of a couple’s life.

Hence, an alternative prospective on periods of crisis in couples involves confronting differences with the belief that therein lies the potential for reconnection, strength building, and readiness for subsequent crises.

This conceptualization of crises in couples supposes a strategy of nurturing the bond. Consequently, the primary recourse in times of difficulty would not be contemplating the relationship's continuity, but rather, the mutual learning embedded within such situations.

Kirshenbaum (1999) posits that agreements and disagreements within a couple imply not only identifying the causes of conflict but also managing these differences to fortify and sustain the relationship. This fresh outlook on couple diverges from perspectives that view conflict as detrimental or corrosive to the relationship. As mentioned by Valdez Medina et al (2011): Conflict resolution skills promote men and women to accept and respect their differences based on love, encompassing independence, freedom, work, communication, equality and friendship, aiming for the well-being of their loved ones.

From this perspective, conflict or crisis within the couple could be perceived as a strategic tool for its preservation. However, internalizing the idea of crisis as an opportunity necessitates accepted of uncertainty and fear surrounding change or the unknown. Despite culture propagating the notion ideal perfect couples never argue, reality dictates that conflict is an inherent aspect of human relationships.

The distinction lies in how the conflict is approached and in the possibilities its resolution engenders. That is not an endorsement of conflict, but rather, an exploration within it to connect with the other's perspectives, delving into their methods and solutions, emphasizing their right to divergence, and fostering a listening environment that transcends immediate judgment, thereby facilitating dialogue and reunion. Viewing conflict or crisis in this light presents an opportunity not only to sustain the couple but also to mobilize new resources that emerge during the construction of alternative solutions.

### **The Capacity to Effect Change within Couples' Relationships**

The capacity to effect change within couples' relationships in the current Western context facilitates creative and innovative interactions, embodying the essence of agency articulated by De Mojica (2016). He posits that individuals become cultural agents when navigating through challenging human interactions, transitioning from a paradigm in crisis towards alternative perspectives of social and cultural change. Acknowledging how couples oscillate between conflict and harmony denotes a process of individual and collective agency, empowering them to surmount barriers as a relational unit. However, transitioning from a predicament endangering the relationship to altering the affective construction sustaining the bond proves to be a formidable task.

Families typically transmit generational methods, behaviors, thoughts, and ideas shaping the framework for building emotional bonds with others. The construction of couple relationships often stems from these previously established bonds. However, this familial process often fails to provide mechanisms for resolving internal conflicts due to the intimacy inherent in their formation. As highlighted by Viveros, et al. (2018), families possess a social and historical sphere wherein they are acknowledged for their potential to instigate reflection and awareness, key elements for provoking change vital to the human development of each member.

Couples focused on family formation within their life trajectory tend to foster agency capacity. Restrepo and Cebotarev (1996) assert that dialogue and acceptance play pivotal roles in nurturing autonomous action concerning change in challenging cohabitation scenarios. According to Múnera (2007) couples become active agents for instigating change. While both men and women contribute to developing agency in couple relationships in conflict situations, it becomes imperative for the affective parties to autonomously and reflectively exercise their resources to overcome the crisis. This dynamic sphere of influence is activated through reflective and conscious efforts, fostering changes in interactional processes (López Franco, 1998).

Considering individual, family and social life projects prevalent in families and couples exercising their opportunities and freedoms, the prospect of joint goals and dreams allows for agency (Sen, 2000), when direct relationships offer mutual growth opportunities, each member of the couple assumes the role of a change agent, acknowledging their own resources and encouraging mobilizations in relational dynamics. This action influences “the action of family life *in situ* where each person’s position reshapes the structure within the framework of capacities, abilities, opportunities and freedoms (Ospina, 2020).

Individuals who develop agency and manage their difficult situations exhibit healthier and more affectionate relationships, consequently impacting the quality of intimate relationships and individual quality of life. This aligns with Trujillo García’s assertion (2005) that quality of life, then, can be evaluated based on the degree of achieving personal goals and the perception of self-fulfillment or satisfaction.

There construction of couple relationships manifests through different pathways, either from a problem or a possibility, often modifying established bonds. Here, maturity in sustaining socio-affective relationships becomes evident, akin to the characterization of mature love as discussed by Jaramillo Quintero et al. (2016). This mature love, resembling fatuous love, fosters emotional, physical and even economic stability in both partners.

For conflict within a couple’s life to evolve towards change, educational or therapeutic processes involving mutual and balanced relationships are essential. This entails an exercise of ‘being there,’ ‘going with,’ becoming a potential for agency (Viveros Chavarría, et al., 2020). Professionals in Psychology, Social Work,

Family Development, Family Therapy bear a significant ethical-social responsibility, employing various styles, techniques, and tools to accompany families and couples in their pursuit of change.

To achieve this, the capacity for agency should not only be cultivated within the groups being supported but should also be an inherent of the professional. Through conscious management, the professional enables others to engage in exercises of self-management and self-development of this capacity. When a professional engages in evaluative introspection to assess their performance and contributions in accompanying couples, they demonstrate self-awareness. This introspection strengthens their professional style, contributing to the mobilization of change actions, as articulated by Rodríguez et al., (2019): with the purpose of mobilizing the regulation of emotions, a necessary arising within the processes themselves for each agent involved.

## Conclusions

Given the above, it is necessary for couples to depart from the traditional cultural notion suggesting that 'healthy' relationships lack conflicts or respond to them with fear, anxiety, and impulsive decisions aimed at quickly resolving difficulties.

Viewing crises as opportunities allows the couple to acquire new resources only visualized through conflicts enabling them to strengthen their differences and prepare for future crises based on the knowledge from past difficulties. These experiences, both negative and positive, serve as invaluable lessons for handling challenging situations in more constructive and beneficial ways for the relationship. The concept of agency is recognized as an autonomous practice within families, empowering them to manage conflicts by acknowledging skills and capacities that facilitate dynamic shifts for change (Suárez and Restrepo, 2005; Restrepo and Cebotarev, 2011).

Love, on the other hand, remains as ongoing construction—an unfinished, imprecise, and imperfect experience. It is a choice, a commitment that involves sacrifice. However, this sacrifice is not imposed by the fear of abandonment or the desire to please; instead, it is accepted while acknowledging the inherent loss involved within the experience itself. In the intricate web of emotional bonds that constitute affective relationships, conflict emerges as an inherent part of relational dynamics. It possesses the ability to either enable or inhibit the capabilities of each member involved.



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