

Emotion Perception is Important for Successful Relationships

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Abstract

The quality of one's relationships can be evaluated along many dimensions: how nurturing and supportive they are, how intimate they are, and how much conflict and antagonism there is. We hypothesize that relationship success is related to emotion perception. Emotion perception is the ability to recognize the emotions of other people. This ability may be important to relationship success because it may help people correctly identify the emotions of people that they are close to and allow them to react appropriately.

A total of 281 undergraduates completed the Metaphors Test and the Network of Relationships Inventory. The Metaphors Test (Barchard, Anderson, Hensley, & Walker, 2011) measures one aspect of emotion perception: how well respondents are able to identify the emotional connotations of metaphors. The Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) measures how frequently various behaviors occur within a relationship. We focused on five NRI scales: antagonism, companionship, conflict, intimacy, and nurturance. In the current study, each participant answered questions regarding a friend and a spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend.

Our results were consistent with our hypothesis. Emotion perception had significant negative correlations with antagonism and conflict, for both the relationship with the friend and the relationship with the spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend. It also had positive correlations with intimacy and nurturance for the relationship with a friend. These findings support our hypothesis that emotion perception is important for successful relationships. Future research should examine a wider variety of relationships, including long-term relationships that occur in school and at work and brief contact relationships, such as 10-minute transactions with strangers. If these associations continue to hold, then managers could use emotion perception tests to help hire new employees and to pair people for long term projects. Emotion perception might be particularly important when working on emotionally charged issues, with vulnerable populations, and in customer service. Having high emotion perception might improve relationship success when working with others in these delicate situations.

Introduction

Emotion perception is the ability to recognize the emotions of other people (Salovey, Mayer, Caruso, & Hee Yoo, 2009). People who have high skill in this area can tell when another person is angry or scared. Moreover, they may be able to tell when someone is trying to cover up an emotion or display a false one (Salovey et al., 2009).

We hypothesize that emotion perception is related to the quality of one's personal relationships. The quality of one's relationships can be evaluated along many dimensions: how nurturing and supportive they are, how intimate they are, and how much conflict and antagonism there is (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). We hypothesize that emotion perception will be related to relationship success because other aspects of emotional intelligence are related to relationship success. Specifically, people who are more aware of emotions are more likely to experience intimacy in their relationships (Wachs & Cordova, 2007), and the ability to manage emotions is negatively related to conflict (Lopes, Nezlek, Extremera, Hertel, Fernández-Berrocal, Schütz, & Salovey, 2011). Emotion perception may be important to relationship success because this skill may help people correctly identify their friends' and family's emotions and act appropriately. For example, knowing that a friend is sad could prompt them to console that person.

Method

Participants

A total of 281 undergraduates (168 females and 113 males) participated in this study in return for course credit. Of those participants, 271 reported their age. Ages ranged from 18 – 50 (mean 19.82, SD = 3.17). Of the 280 participants who reported their ethnicity, 61.1% were Caucasian, 11.8% were Hispanic, 10.7% were Asian, 8.6% were African American, 5.7% were Pacific Islander, and 2.1% were other.

Measures

The Metaphors Test

The Metaphors Test (Barchard, Anderson, Hensley, & Walker, 2011) measures emotion perception by testing how well participants are able to perceive the emotions conveyed by metaphors. It is made up of ten metaphors. Participants must rate the extent to which each metaphor expresses three separate emotions using a 5-point scale. It is scored using proportion consensus scoring: For example, if 72% of participants chose option A for an item, that option A would be scored as 0.72.

The Network of Relationships Inventory

The Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) is a questionnaire that asks respondents to describe the relationship that the researcher has chosen to study. In the current study, participants answered questions regarding a friend and a spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend. The NRI is designed to measure several dimensions of relationship success. We are focusing on five dimensions: antagonism, companionship, conflict, intimacy, and nurturance.

Procedure

Participants completed both tests as part of a larger study in return for course credit. The whole study took 180 minutes (two 90-minute sessions) and was administered online.

Data Analysis

We correlated the Metaphors Test scores with the five scales from the NRI (antagonism, intimacy, nurturance, conflict, and companionship). We calculated these correlations twice, once for the friendship relationship and once for the spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

Results

For both the friendship and the spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, emotion perception had significant negative correlations with antagonism and conflict. For friendship, emotion perception had significant positive correlations with intimacy and nurturance. See Table 1.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between emotion perception and relationship success. We hypothesized that intimacy, nurturance, and companionship would correlate positively with emotion perception, and that conflict and antagonism would correlate negatively with emotion perception. Our hypotheses were partially supported. All correlations were in expected directions, but companionship had no significant relationships with emotion perception. High emotion perception was associated with less conflict and antagonism and more intimacy and nurturance.

It is noteworthy that the correlations between emotion perception and relationship success were stronger for the friendship relationship than for the spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Future research should explore these differences. Perhaps college students have known their friends much longer than they have known their boyfriends and girlfriends. Or perhaps they are around their spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend more often, offering more opportunities for conflict and antagonism. Future research could control for the length of the relationship and the amount of time spent together to determine if emotion perception is equally important in all of these relationships.

Future research should examine a wider variety of relationships. This study focused only on a relationship with a friend and a relationship with a spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend. Future research could examine the relationship between emotion perception and relationship success in long-term relationships that occur in school (teachers, classmates) and at work (colleagues, supervisors, supervisees) and brief contact relationships, such as 10-minute transactions with strangers that might occur in customer service. If the relationship between emotion perception and relationship success continues to hold across these various settings and relationships, then this work will have implications for the work environment. First, companies could use emotion perception tests as part of their application process when hiring new employees, in order to find people who are likely to get along well in a team. Second, managers can use emotion perception tests to form work groups for long term projects: team leaders should have high emotion perception skill. Third, emotion perception might be needed for all employees if they are working on emotionally charged issues, with vulnerable populations, and in customer service. No test should be used on its own for important personnel decisions. However, if future research replicates the current findings in a wider range of circumstances and relationships, then emotion perception tests might be a valuable addition to our current toolkit, to ensure success of our projects and our work relationships.

Table 1

Correlations of Metaphors Test and NRI

NRI Scale	Relationship with	
	Friend	Spouse/Boyfriend/Girlfriend
Companionship	.10	.06
Intimacy	.18**	.08
Nurturance	.29**	.10+
Conflict	-.26**	-.12*
Antagonism	-.26**	-.14*

Note. $df = 279$. + $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

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