

Positive Expressivity And Relationship Success

Kalina Massie, Monica Beisecker, & Kimberly A. Barchard
University Of Nevada, Las Vegas

Reference: Massie, K., Beisecker, M, & Barchard, K.A. (2003). *Positive expressivity and relationship success*. Presentation at the Western Psychological Association Annual Convention, April-May 2003, Vancouver, BC.

Contact Information: Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.edu

Abstract

Positive Expressivity is the tendency to express one's positive emotions non-verbally. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between positive expressivity and relationship success. Relationship success was measured in three ways. The first two of these were related to the quality of a person's relationship with their best friend: a 22-item adjective scale and a question measuring the perceived likelihood that they would be friends with this person in five years. The third measure of relationship success was related to romantic relationships. We asked participants if they had been involved in a romantic relationship lasting more than one month within the last year. A sample of 191 university students was used.

Although there was no relationship between positive expressivity and the latter two measures of relationship success, there was a significant positive correlation between positive expressivity and the adjective measure. It may be that the expression of positive emotions leads to the perception of the relationship as more caring and supportive, or it may be that the presence of a quality relationship with one's best friend leads to higher levels of positive expressivity. Implications for further research are discussed.

Introduction

Emotional Expressivity is the extent to which an individual expresses their emotions non-verbally. Emotional Expressivity can be divided into three factors (Gross & John, 1998):

- Positive Expressivity is the tendency to express one's positive emotions non-verbally
- Negative Expressivity is the tendency to express one's negative emotions non-verbally
- Impulse Strength is the strength of one's emotional impulses

Interpersonal relationships can provide a foundation for encouragement, optimism, support, communication and most importantly, comfort in being oneself (Tagawa & Yoshida, 2002). One study showed that individuals possessing these traits tend to find more positive meaning in themselves and in turn express positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2000). This suggests that positive expressivity and relationship quality may be positively associated. The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that relationship success is associated with higher levels of Positive Expressivity.

Method

The sample consisted of 191 university students (67 men, 124 women). For men, the age range was 18-29 (mean 19.9, SD 2.5); for women, the age range was 18-38 (mean 19.6, SD 3.3). Most participants were White (58%) with the next largest group being Asian (13%).

Measures

Positive Expressivity Scale (Barchard, 2002). The Positive Expressivity Scale is a 10-item questionnaire, with each item rated from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate). The Positive Expressivity Scale is one of two scales from the Expressing Emotions Questionnaire. The complete questionnaire is attached.

Romantic Relationship Question (Barchard, 2001a). Participants are asked if they had been involved in a romantic relationship in the last year lasting at least one month. Respondents answer yes or no.

Best Friend Questionnaire (Barchard, 2001b). This questionnaire consists of two parts. First, participants rate how likely it is that their friendship with their best friend will last at least five years. This item is rated 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Next, participants rate 22 adjectives in terms of how well they describe their relationship (e.g., open, supportive, comfortable). Each item is rated from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate). See attached.

Procedure

Participants took part in the study in return for course credit. Each individual completed two 1 ½-hour testing sessions. These sessions were usually held one week apart. The three measures used in this study were all administered during the first testing session.

Results

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the Positive Expressivity of people who had been in romantic relationships and people who had not been in romantic relationships in the last year. There was no significant difference for either men ($t(28.18) = 1.22, p > .05$) or women ($t(37.43) = 1.05, p > .05$). Next, the correlation was calculated between Positive Expressivity and the likelihood that the relationship with their best friend would last at least five years. This correlation was not significant for either men ($r = .091, p > .05$) or women ($r = .154, p > .05$). Finally, the correlation was calculated between Positive Expressivity and the average response on the 22-adjective measure of relationship quality. This correlation was significant for both men ($r = .258, p < .05$) and women ($r = .325, p < .01$).

Discussion

Successful relationships are said to lead a person to have certain characteristics: encouragement, optimism, support, communication, and comfort in being oneself. Past research shows that individuals possessing these characteristics also express positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998). We therefore hypothesized that relationship quality would be associated with Positive Expressivity.

We found no relation between Positive Expressivity and whether or not someone had been in a romantic relationship in the last year, or between Positive Expressivity and the likelihood that they would still be friends with their best friend five years from now.

These non-significant findings were unexpected. However, they may have been due to a possible restriction of range, because Psy 101 students were used. University students in general, and students in 100-level courses in particular, may have moved recently. Moving is likely to cause disruptions in one's friendships and romantic relationships. If this study was repeated in a sample of community members or more advanced undergraduate students, significant relationships between these variables might be found.

However, we did find a significant positive relationship between Positive Expressivity and the quality of one's relationship with one's best friend. This provides some support for our hypothesis that positive expressivity is related to relationship success.

On the other hand, because this was a correlational study, we do not know if 1) the expression of positive emotions leads to better relationships with one's best friend, 2) the presence of a caring and supportive relationship with one's best friend leads to more positive emotions and hence greater positive expressivity, or 3) both of these variables are caused by a third variable, such as the tendency to experience positive emotions themselves.

This research should be repeated with the following extensions and modifications:

- We should find out if the participant has moved recently, because moving is likely to disrupt one's relationships.
- We should use somewhat older participants, so that romantic relationships and best friend relationships have had a chance to stabilize.
- We should ask how long the person has been friends with their best friend and how long the person was in the romantic relationship.

- We should assess the tendency to experience positive emotions, in addition to the tendency to express them.
- Ideally, we should manipulate positive expressivity (for example, randomly assign subjects to groups, and train one group to express their positive emotions more) to assess whether higher levels of positive expressivity cause better relationships.
- We should ask participants to get their best friends to complete a questionnaire, as well, so that we can assess relationship quality from another perspective, and so we can ask the best friends the extent to which the participant expresses positive emotions.
- We should include a measure of negative expressivity, so we can tell if it is the expression of any emotion or positive emotions in particular that are associated with relationship success.

In addition, it would be interesting to extend this research into an organizational context. Participants could be asked to report on the emotional expressivity (both positive and negative) of both themselves and each of their co-workers, and to report on the quality of their relationships with each co-worker. Then, one group of co-workers could be randomly assigned to receive training on the benefits of expressing positive and negative emotions to co-workers, and could receive instruction on how to do this effectively. Afterwards, the expressivity and relationship quality of the two groups could again be assessed. The experimental group who received the training could be compared with the control group, to determine if changes in emotional expressivity were associated with changes in relationship quality.

References

Barchard, K.A. (2001a). *Romantic Relationship Question*. Unpublished questionnaire item, available from Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.edu

Barchard, K.A. (2001b). *Best Friend Questionnaire*. Unpublished questionnaire, available from Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.edu

Barchard, K.A. (2002). The Discriminant Validity of Positive Expressivity and Negative Expressivity. Unpublished manuscript available from Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.edu

Fredrickson, B.L. (2000). Cultivating positive emotions to optimize health and well being. *Prevention and Treatment*, 3, 1 – 25.

Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (1998). Mapping the domain of expressivity. Multi-method evidence for a hierarchical model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 170-191.

Tagawa, N., & Toshikazu, Y. (2002). The effects of forming intimate relationships on one's view of interpersonal relationships. Romantic relationships and friendships among adults. *Japanese Journal of Interpersonal and Social Psychology*.

Expressing Emotions

Please use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes you.

Very INaccurate	Moderately INaccurate	Neither INaccurate nor Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate
1	2	3	4	5

1.	Wish I could more easily show my negative feelings	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Laugh out loud if something is funny	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Suspect that my facial expressions give me away when I feel sad	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Hug my close friends	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Shout or scream when I'm angry	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Express my happiness in a childlike manner	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Keep my feelings to myself, regardless of how scared I am	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Show my feelings when I'm happy	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Find it difficult showing people that I'm angry with them	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Show my sadness	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Sometimes laugh out loud when reading or watching TV	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Express my fears openly when I'm with my close friends	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Can't help but look upset when something bad happens	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Have difficulty showing affection	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Rarely show my anger	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Have a quiet laugh	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Keep my happy feelings to myself	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Sometimes cause a scene when I'm angry	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Find it difficult showing people that I care about them	1	2	3	4	5
20.	Keep my feelings to myself, regardless of how unhappy I am	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Show my fear	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Raise my voice when I'm angry	1	2	3	4	5
23.	Express my sadness openly when I'm with my close friends	1	2	3	4	5
24.	Express my affection physically	1	2	3	4	5

Note: Positive Expressivity is assessed using items 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 24, with items 14, 16, 17, 19 reverse-scored. Negative Expressivity is assessed using the remaining items, with items 1, 7, 9, 15, 20 reverse-scored.

Best Friend Questionnaire

Think about your relationship with your best friend. Your best friend might be someone of the same sex or someone of the opposite sex; someone you are related to or someone you are unrelated to. Your best friend is the person you feel closest to.

Write down his or her initials here: _____

How long have you been friends? _____

How likely is it that you will be friends five years from now?

Very UNlikely	Pretty UNlikely	Somewhat UNlikely	Somewhat Likely	Pretty Likely	Very Likely
1	2	3	4	5	6

Below is a list of adjectives. Rate each adjective in terms of how well it describes your *relationship* with your best friend. Rate the adjectives based on how well they describe your relationship as it is *right now*, not as it was in the past or how you'd like it to be in the future.

Very INaccurate	Somewhat INaccurate	Neither Accurate nor INaccurate	Somewhat Accurate	Very Accurate							
1	2	3	4	5							
Open	1	2	3	4	5	Awkward	1	2	3	4	5
Supportive	1	2	3	4	5	Caring	1	2	3	4	5
Tedious	1	2	3	4	5	Distant	1	2	3	4	5
Fun	1	2	3	4	5	Comfortable	1	2	3	4	5
UNfulfilling	1	2	3	4	5	Tense	1	2	3	4	5
Friendly	1	2	3	4	5	Satisfying	1	2	3	4	5
Boring	1	2	3	4	5	Loving	1	2	3	4	5
Giving	1	2	3	4	5	Strained	1	2	3	4	5
Superficial	1	2	3	4	5	Trusting	1	2	3	4	5
Warm	1	2	3	4	5	Relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
Rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	Successful	1	2	3	4	5