

Emotional Expressions and Conflict Tactics in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Emotional expressivity is defined as the tendency to use nonverbal actions, such as posture and tone of voice, to communicate emotions (Barchard & Matsumoto, 2006). Emotional expressions are critical to how we interact with the people in our lives. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) measures the frequency of conflict tactics (such as negotiation, psychological aggression, and physical assault) in a current or recent romantic relationship. The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between the expression of various emotions and different methods of dealing with conflict. It may be that the expression of some emotions is related to positive methods of dealing with conflict, such as negotiation, whereas the expression of other emotions is related to negative conflict tactics, such as yelling and hitting your partner.

In this study, 641 participants completed the CTS2 and measures of the expression of six different emotions: happiness, affection, amusement, anger, fear, and sadness. As expected, different emotions were associated with the use of positive and negative conflict tactics. Negotiation was positively related to the expression of happiness, affection, fear, and sadness. In contrast, the expression of anger was positively related to psychological aggression, physical assault, sexual coercion, and injuring one's partner. Future research should further examine the relationship between the expression of anger and conflict tactics. If couples are taught to avoid discussing a problem when they are in the heat of the moment, can this successfully avoid negative conflict tactics such as physical and psychological attacks?

Introduction

Emotional expressivity is the tendency to communicate emotions through nonverbal means such as tone of voice, posture, facial expressions, and actions (Barchard & Matsumoto, 2006). Recent research has shown that it is useful to distinguish between expressions of distinct emotions (Barchard & Matsumoto, 2006). This study distinguished between the expression of happiness, amusement, affection, sadness, fear, and anger. We hypothesized that the expression of emotions would be differentially related to methods of dealing with conflict in a romantic relationship. Rauer and Volling (2005) found that the expression of negative emotions has more impact on a marriage than the expression of positive emotions. We therefore hypothesized the expression of positive emotions is related to positive methods of dealing with conflict, such as negotiation, whereas the expression of anger is related to negative conflict tactics, such as yelling and hitting your partner.

Method

Participants

A total of 641 (205 male, 436 female) participants completed this study to receive course credit. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56 (mean 20.74, SD 5.10). Participants identified themselves as 61.8% White, 11.9% Asian, 10.8% Hispanic, 6.9% Black, .6% Native American, and 8% other.

Measures

The Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Expressivity (Barchard, 2001) includes 24 items. Each item uses a 5-point agreement scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Twenty-two of the items measure six emotions: happiness, amusement, affection, sadness, fear, and anger. Barchard and Matsumoto (2006) showed that the model with six emotion-specific factors provided the best fit to the data, indicating that these items measure six distinct kinds of expressivity.

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, et al., 1996) measures how frequently a person has used various tactics for dealing with conflict. The CTS2 assesses both positive and negative relationship behaviors, and results in subscale scores for the frequency of five different types of tactics: negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, sexual coercion, and injury. The CTS2 items focus on the actual events that take place, rather than the participants' feelings about the events. Each of the 39 items are rated on a scale of 0 to 7, where 0 = has never happened, 1 = happened 1 time, 2 = 2 times, 3 = 3-5 times, 4 = 6-10 times, 5 = 10-20 times, 6 = more than 20 times, and 7 = has happened, but not in the time period in question. Participants receive a score that is equal to the midpoints of their answers. For example a Category 4 answer (6-10 times) would be scored as 8, which is the midpoint (Straus, Hamby, et al. 1996). The frequencies scoring method provides an estimate of frequencies of these different types of acts (Vega & O'Leary, 2007). In the current study, participants rated the frequency of these behaviors in a current or recent romantic relationship. Vega and O'Leary (2007) reported strong two-month test-retest reliability for the CTS2: Negotiation $r = .49$, Psychological Aggression $r = .72$, Physical Assault $r = .68$, Sexual Coercion $r = .67$, and Injury $r = .79$.

Procedures

Participants completed these two measures during supervised group-testing sessions, as part of a larger study.

Results

There were eight significant correlations between the six types of emotional expressivity and the five types of conflict tactics. See Table 1. Negotiation was positively related to the expression of four emotions: happiness, affection, fear, and sadness. In contrast, the expression of anger was positively related to negative conflict tactics: specifically, the use of psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion. Finally, the expression of amusement was positively related to sexual coercion.

Although most of these correlations were small, the correlation between expression of anger and psychological aggression was moderate ($r = .28$). Angry people tend to say mean things to their partners.

Table 1

Correlations of Emotional Expressivity with Conflict Tactics

Emotion	Negotiation	Psychological Aggression	Physical Assault	Sexual Coercion	Injury
Happiness	.08*	.02	-.02	.01	-.03
Affection	.12**	-.01	.03	-.02	.02
Amusement	.06	.03	.02	.09*	-.05
Anger	.06	.28**	.14**	.13**	-.02
Fear	.09*	.05	.04	-.02	.02
Sadness	.08*	.05	.02	.04	.04

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Conclusions

This study examined the correlations between conflict tactics and six dimensions of emotional expressivity (happiness, amusement, affection, sadness, fear, and anger). We hypothesized that the expression of positive emotions would be related to positive methods of dealing with conflict, such as negotiation, whereas the expression of negative emotions would be related to negative conflict tactics, such as yelling and hitting. As expected, negotiation was positively related to happiness and affection; however it was also related to the expression of fear and sadness. Upon reflection, we concluded that the expression of sadness and fear may be positively related to negotiation because expressing these emotions to a partner shows good communication skills and trust within the relationship. In contrast, the expression of anger was positively related to negative conflict tactics such as physical assault and sexual coercion. Future research should further examine the expression of anger during conflict, and how to express anger without harming one's partner.

Future research should also examine the relationship between sexual coercion and the expression of amusement. This study found a small positive relationship between these variables. One possible but disturbing interpretation of this finding is that some people find sexual coercion amusing. Future research could attempt to determine which people or which relationships have the strongest relationship between these two variables, and could then explore the causes of this relationship.

Finally, future research should compare men and women to determine if they have the same relationships between conflict tactics and emotional expressivity. Swift (2002) studied male anger, hostility, and emotional intelligence as related to partner violence. He concluded that some of the men in his study had a difficult time determining exactly what emotions they were feeling. If so, they may express their emotions differently than women do, and this might influence the relationship between emotional expressivity and conflict tactics. Exploring why men and women use different conflict tactics could lead to more understanding and less relationship conflict overall.

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