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Melissa Ubando

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Gender Differences in Intimacy, Emotional Expressivity, and Relationship Satisfaction

Melissa Ubando

Pepperdine University

Assigned in COM 300: Introduction to Communication Research (Dr. Lauren Amaro)

Abstract

This research explores how intimacy and emotional expressivity affects perceived relationship satisfaction in undergraduate couples. A survey was administered to college students from ages 18 to 24 and they participated in the surveys on a volunteer basis. The study consisted of a convenience sample of college-aged students in various types of romantic relationships (i.e. dating, long distance, engaged, and casual or “friends with benefits”). Our hypothesis stated that men with high verbal emotional expression would experience higher relationship satisfaction; however, our analysis of the survey responses of the participants (n=103) indicated that this was not the case, as men who reported high verbal emotional expression also reported lower relationship satisfaction. The findings also revealed: generally, males have a more positive perspective of their own intimacy in relationships while women have a more negative perception of their own intimacy and under the category of emotional expressivity, men self-reported higher for verbal and nonverbal affection while women self-reported higher for supportiveness.

Keywords: gender, emotional expressivity, relationship satisfaction, intimacy

Introduction

Good communication is the most important aspect in maintaining a healthy relationship. However, most complications in relationships arise from miscommunication just as often, or more so, than from lack of communication. Relationships can benefit greatly from a multicultural understanding between men and women. Drury (1999) showed the link between healthy relationships and communication levels and provides an overview for various ways to maintain romantic relationships, concerning indirect communication, relational dialectics, and relational repair. Research by Duncombe and Marsden (1993) explored the gender differences in emotional behavior and assert that, “many women express unhappiness primarily with what they perceive as men’s unwillingness or incapacity to ‘do’ the emotional intimacy which appears to them necessary to sustain close heterosexual couple relationships.” Emotional expressivity is one facet of communication and this research will further explore its effects on relationships.

Male vs. Female Communication Styles

Tannen (1990) argues that communication is “a continual balancing act, juggling the conflicting needs for intimacy and independence” (p. 27). Since men and women are raised differently, Tannen (1990) determined that masculine and feminine styles of discourse are best understood as two distinct cultural dialects, rather than as inferior or superior ways of speaking. “If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be cross-cultural” (Tannen, 1990, p. 42). Tannen departs from much feminist scholarship by insisting that there are gender differences in the way we speak.

In her book, *You Just Don’t Understand*, Tannen (1990) delineates the six main differences between the way women and men use language: status vs. support, independence vs. intimacy, advice vs. understanding, information vs. feelings, orders vs. proposals and conflict vs. compromise. From her informal observations, Tannen developed Genderlect and used the theory to describe each gender’s communication patterns. The theory identifies the inherently different driving forces behind the two communication styles. She demonstrates why each gender communicates and what separates men and women – women seek connection through communication while men seek status. Women primarily engage in conversation to form and maintain relationships whereas men tend to talk only when it makes them seem strong and independent. Furthermore, since communication is contingent upon content and relationship, the way each gender chooses to communicate and how they perceive an interaction can lead to disparities within their relationships. Tannen suggested that both men and women need to learn how to adopt the other’s voice, though she acknowledged that expecting men and women to alter their linguistic styles is a stretch. With a more nuanced understanding of the effect of gender on language use, relationships can improve.

Emotional Expressivity and Relationship Satisfaction

Empirical findings consistently provide support for the sex differences regarding emotional expressivity and results from numerous studies indicated that women are more emotionally expressive than men. However, Kring and Gordon's (1997) study points out that in the past, researchers conducted very little experiments geared toward examining the differences in expressive, experiential, and physiological emotional responses between men and women. The conceptualization of emotion involves multiple aspects – “a behavioral or expressive component, an experiential or verbal component, and a physiological component” (Kring & Gordon, 1997). They define emotional expressivity as “the extent to which individuals outwardly display their emotions”, which is in line with Gross and John's (1997) conceptualization of emotional expressivity as the behavioral changes (e.g. facial, postural) that typically accompany emotion. Gross and John's (1997) definition of emotional expressivity provided the framework for this study. For the purpose of this research, emotional expression will be assessed through both nonverbal and verbal affection.

Latu, Schmid Mast, and Kaiser (2013) approached gender differences in “emotionality” according to experience and expression. Simon and Nath (2014) claimed, while “there is no significant difference in the frequency with which men and women report emotions in general, there are significant gender differences in the frequency with which they report positive and negative emotions” (p. 1150). Results from their study indicate that women report negative feelings, such as sadness, more than men (Simon and Nath, 2014, p. 1156). Furthermore, women reported feeling anxious and sad more than men and men reported feeling excited and calm more than women (Simon and Nath, 2014, p. 1157). Hess et al. (2000) asserted widely-held gender stereotypes: in Western cultures women are generally believed to be more emotionally expressive than men and “are expected to smile more as well as to show more sadness, fear, and guilt.” Contrastingly, the general consensus appears to be that men display their emotions exclusively in terms of physically aggressive anger (Hess et al., 2000). These findings align with what Parkins (2012) claimed in her study: “there are certain emotions that have been stereotypically linked to each gender” (p. 46). Kring and Gordon's (1997) research aimed to clarify not only whether men and women experience the same emotions, but also if they share the same physiological responses to emotional stimuli. They found that men and women who were more expressive usually came from families who were also more expressive. While this study was not successful in exploring the link between social context and expressive behavior for each gender, they were able to make an important distinction – some studies have found that women who self-reported experiencing more emotion were also more expressive.

Hall, Carter, & Hogan (2000) outlined the following problems in relying on nonverbal cues to gauge emotions: (1) “nonverbal behavior does not necessarily signify emotion”, (2) “even when nonverbal cues do indicate emotion, it is often difficult to identify what emotion is being felt”, and (3) “even if nonverbal behavior is conveying emotional information, and even if we can identify which emotion is being conveyed, there is often great ambiguity about the authenticity of the display.” Subtle, nonverbal cues (e.g. facial expressions and simple gestures) can be interpreted in vastly different ways. Body language can convey a different meaning than intended and be improperly received. Hall et al. (2000) claimed that using nonverbal cues to judge emotions could increase the chances of the subject being misunderstood. Measuring emotional expressivity is intricate as various aspects must be considered, such as the intensity, frequency, or duration of the emotion experienced (Latu et al., 2013). Hence, our survey includes statements under both nonverbal and verbal affection, as well as supportiveness.

Intimacy

Relationship satisfaction is rooted in intimacy, which Yoo (2013) defined as “individuals' subjective experiences of closeness and connectedness with their romantic partners, which emerge from couple relationship processes that involve self-disclosure, mutual trust and validation, empathy, and acceptance” (p. 1). Emotional expressivity can also be used as a tool in measuring intimacy. If each partner has different expectations of emotional expression within their relationship, conflict will ensue. Tannen (1990) asserted that women and men typically have contrasting ideas of intimacy, and therefore have contrasting ideas of independence. A critical question to consider is whether greater emotional expressivity leads to greater feelings of intimacy between both people in a relationship and subsequently, greater relationship satisfaction. Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, and Gangamma (2013), explored the connection between communication, intimacy, sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Results from their study indicated that for men and women alike, feeling like their partner had a positive communication style led to greater feelings of intimacy as well as relationship satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2013).

Though previous research has been conducted to study emotional responses in men and women, few theories have been proposed to explain the link between emotional expressivity and gender and its affect on romantic relationships. Tannen (1990) claimed that women express emotions, share personal feelings, relate stories, and listen empathetically whereas men engage in competitive joking and assertive speech to win control of the

conversation. While preceding literature covers a broader examination of the theories concerning the differences between the conversational styles of men and women (i.e. “rapport-talk” or private conversation and “report-talk” or public speaking), this literature review will focus on the effect of each gender’s communication style and reported levels of emotional expressivity on their relationship satisfaction. Previous research supports the claim that emotional expressivity has a great effect on intimacy and relationship satisfaction. This review will account for the gap between women and men’s expressive behavior and how it affects relationships. From prior findings, it can be hypothesized that: within various types of interpersonal relationships, females and males report different levels of intimacy in their interpersonal relationships; and, men with high verbal emotional expression would experience higher relationship satisfaction. The following research questions were put forth:

RQ1: How do men and women between the ages of 18-24 perceive intimacy differently?

RQ2: In what ways does gender influence a person’s likelihood in expressing emotions in a relationship?

Methods

Participants

This study requires at least 150 college students from ages 18-24 to participate in the surveys on a volunteer basis. The participants will consist of students from all four grade levels and varying majors in attempt to reduce sampling bias within the university population. The research will consist of a convenience sample of college-aged students in various types of romantic relationships (i.e. dating, long distance, engaged, and casual or “friends with benefits”). Moss and Schwebel (1993) claimed that “in present-day Western societies, intimacy is particularly sought in relationships” and many perceive intimacy as a major factor in evaluating their romantic relationships. The majority of participants will come from a small, wealthy, Christian private school in the Southern Californian region while other participants will be drawn using social media methods from varying public and private schools throughout California and the East Coast. This method of sampling will help us conduct research on a specific demographic that will best represent the young adult community in relationships, as college is a common time in which young adults begin to foster meaningful relationships.

Procedure

Each participant will be asked to partake in one online survey intended to measure sex versus gender identity and the correlation between self-reported intimacy and emotional expressivity levels and relationship satisfaction. The survey will be sent to them as a link through various social media platforms such as Facebook. The surveys will be kept anonymous, only asking for the participants’ year, gender, and months in relationship.

Measures

We adapted several surveys from three different sources all of which utilizes a 5-point Likert-type scale. The scale pattern is from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The participants were asked to mark the option according to how they felt about each statement. The items can be classified under three scales, which measure emotional expressivity, relationship satisfaction, and intimacy. For example, questions on relationship satisfaction include, “how well does your partner meet your needs?” and statements on supportiveness include, “praise each other’s accomplishments”. The scale to measure intimacy is adapted from Sternberg’s (1988) Triangular Love Scale using items 1-15. The scale for relationship satisfaction is adapted from Hendrick’s (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale. Emotional Expressivity is measured with the Floyd and Morman’s (1998) Affectionate Communication Index, which can be broken down into the following categories: nonverbal affection, verbal affection, and supportiveness. The measures and results obtained from the responses will be compared between the genders (which will be asked at the beginning of the survey) to investigate any possible correlation.

Results

Table 1 – Relationship Type

	Male	Female	
Dating	16	51	
Casual “friends with benefits”	2	6	
Long Distance	3	22	
Engaged	0	3	
Total	21	82	103

Table 2 – Relationship Satisfaction

	Male	Female
How well does your partner meet your needs?	4.24	4.19
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	4.57	4.32
How good is your relationship compared to most?	4.57	4.38
*How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?	3.71	4.49
To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	3.95	3.96
How much do you love your partner?	4.48	4.57
*How many problems are there in your relationship?	4.00	3.79

Note: *items were reverse coded

Table 3 – Intimacy

	Male	Female
I am actively supportive of my partner's well-being.	4.62	4.61
I have a warm relationship with my partner.	4.71	4.56
I am able to count on my partner in times of need.	4.38	4.45
My partner is able to count on me in times of need.	4.62	4.65
I am willing to share myself and my possessions with my partner.	3.50	4.60
I receive considerable emotional support from my partner.	4.24	4.39
I give considerable emotional support to my partner.	4.67	4.50
I communicate well with my partner.	4.14	4.07
I value my partner greatly in my life.	4.57	4.65
I feel close to my partner.	4.57	4.56
I have a comfortable relationship with my partner.	4.62	4.56
I feel that I really understand my partner.	4.43	4.29
I feel that my partner really understands me.	4.19	4.15
I feel that I can really trust my partner.	4.62	4.44

I share deeply personal information about myself with my partner.	4.43	4.56
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Table 4 – Emotional Expressivity

	Male	Female
<i>Nonverbal Affection</i>		
Hold Hands	3.90	3.79
Kiss on lips	4.28	4.40
Kiss on cheeks	4.05	3.80
Give massages	3.28	3.13
Put arm around shoulder	3.81	3.77
Hug each other	4.33	4.36
Sit close to each other	4.48	4.49
Look into each other's eyes	4.48	4.18
Wink at each other	3.09	2.63
<i>Verbal Affection</i>		
Say "you're a good friend"	2.95	2.61
Say "I like you"	3.67	3.50
Say "I love you"	3.90	4.16
Say "you're my best friend"	3.38	3.51
Say how important relationship is	3.95	3.94
<i>Supportiveness</i>		
Help each other with problems	4.57	4.43
Acknowledge each other's birthday	4.48	4.75
Share private information	4.48	4.61
Give each other compliments	4.76	4.58
Praise each other's accomplishments	4.67	4.72

Research question 1 posed how men and women between the ages of 18-24 perceive intimacy differently. To test this question, we conducted a test of mean difference between male and female college students within the intimacy scale. Results illustrated that men were more likely to believe that their actions were very intimate; men had higher scores on the majority of questions on the intimacy scale (1, 2, 7, 8, 10-14). Also, men seemed to believe they provide much emotional support and warmth to their partners with mean scores above 4.6, yet they scored lower than females when asked about receiving emotional support. Females reported that they were actively supportive, but scored lower ($M=4.56$) in regards to having a warm relationship with their partner. Still, females seemed to feel they received considerable emotional support more than males did. Females were more likely to be willing to share themselves and possessions with their partners with a mean of $M=4.60$ and males at $M=4.52$. Additionally, females reported being more likely to share deeply personal information ($M=4.56$) than males ($M=4.43$). Regarding understanding, males reported understanding their partners more than females by a mean difference of 0.13. Furthermore, females responded being less comfortable and trusting of their partners than did men. Overall, males seem to have a more positive perspective of their relationship intimacy while women seem to have a more negative perspective of their own intimacy.

Research question 2 makes an inquiry about the gender differences between males and females and what influences their likelihood in emotional expressivity in their relationships. Overall, our findings showed that in two out of the three categories of emotional expressivity – which included nonverbal and verbal expression – men scored higher than women. These results indicate that males believe they show their significant other more than enough emotional expressivity to prove that they care. These nonverbal expressions included items such as kissing and holding hands. For that item, the mean score for men was ($M= 3.97$) and the mean score for women was ($M= 3.79$). For nonverbal and verbal affection men had mean scores of ($M=3.97$) and ($M=3.57$) respectively, whereas women report ($M=3.84$) and ($M=3.54$). The third area under emotional expressivity measured supportiveness (i.e. praising each other's accomplishments). For that item, women scored higher than men, which indicates that they believe they are more emotionally supportive in a relationship. Women's mean score, ($M=4.72$), were slightly greater than men's, ($M=4.67$). Under supportiveness, men had a slightly lower mean score ($M=4.59$) compared to women ($M=4.62$). For overall emotional expressivity, men had a mean score of ($M=4.03$) and women had a mean score of ($M=3.97$).

Our hypothesis stated that men with high verbal emotional expression would experience higher relationship satisfaction. According to the data under the heading “verbal affection”, men and women scored nearly equally overall on the statements given. Men scored higher on saying “I like you” and “you're a good friend” as well as saying how important the relationship is to their partner. Women scored higher in saying, “I love you” and “you're my best friend”. When looking at the table under “relationship satisfaction”, men scored slightly higher than women on most of the individual items, but the mean scores of each were almost equal for relationship satisfaction. Men who reported high verbal emotional expression overall experienced a marginally lower relationship satisfaction compared to women. For relationship satisfaction, the mean score for males was ($M=4.22$) and the mean score for females was ($M=4.24$). Under emotional expressivity for verbal affection, the mean score for males was ($M=3.57$) and the mean score for females was ($M=3.54$). For overall emotional expressivity, the mean score for males was ($M=4.23$) and the mean score for females was ($M=4.19$). The test revealed a slightly negative correlation between verbal emotional expression and relationship satisfaction, thereby disproving the hypothesis.

Discussion

Significant Findings and Implications

This research intended to find support for the correlation between reported intimacy, emotional expressivity and relationship satisfaction in men and women. Overall, the results showed that males had a more positive perception of their own intimacy; however, males that reported high verbal emotional expressivity had lower levels of relationship satisfaction than women. Because previous research indicates that intimacy and emotional expressivity is tied to relationship satisfaction, our findings solidify the general claims made in those studies.

The findings showed that women reported that they felt they shared more personal information with their partners yet they were less trusting of and comfortable with their partners than men. The study conducted by Yoo et al. (2013) indicated that for men and women alike, levels of relationship satisfaction depended on how intimate they felt with their partner, which in turn depended how well they perceived their communication to be. As a whole, men self-reported that they were very intimate in their relationships, yet their relationship satisfaction score was lower in our findings. Our survey intended to measure perceptions of one's own intimacy, emotional expressivity and

satisfaction in a relationship, not their partner's. Men thought highly of their own intimacy, more so than women did. Each gender's perceptions of their emotional expressivity and feelings of intimacy in relationships leads into further analysis of relationship expectations of men and women.

Incorporating the intimacy portion of Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale, along with Hendrick's relationship assessment scale and the Affectionate Communication Index, into our survey allowed for greater construct validity. By strictly using items 1-15 from Sternberg's scale and disregarding the other items, we were able to focus on measuring intimacy alone. The Affectionate Communication Index had construct validity when measuring emotional expressivity in romantic relationships as it included both verbal and nonverbal categories of affection and supportiveness. Incorporating Hendrick's 7-item relationship assessment scale enabled our survey to have stronger construct validity, though two of the scale items were negatively worded and had to be reverse coded prior to running factor analysis. Previous research indicates that the scales chosen are widely regarded as reliable.

Limitations of Study

Some limitations of the present research include the unequal male to female ratio. Only 21 men responded in comparison to the 82 women, so chances are they were more willing to participate in the survey because they had a positive perspective of their relationship, hence, they had higher mean scores. In the future, there should be an even number of men and women participants in the data collected, preferably couples in which each partner responds so the data can be matched accordingly. The age range of the samples was contained to 18-24 year olds; the mean age was reflective of typical undergraduate samples; however, majority of the respondents came from a top tier Christian university in Southern California. Due to this, the results from our survey are not an accurate representation of undergraduate students across the country.

Future Study

Future studies could replicate our current study and utilize a voluntary sample, instead of a convenience sample, to avoid misrepresentation. Because of the extremely disproportionate ratio of men and women who took the survey and no way to indicate which responses were partners in a relationship, another portion could be added to the survey to specify that. Instead of sending the survey out to undergraduates in general, the next study could request only couples in which both partners are required to respond and the data collected could be broken down further to specify each individual couple's scores per item per category.

Possible future research may also explore the societal concept of male privilege. The findings in our study also raised the following question: are there lower expectations of males in relationships than females? This study showed that men believed they were very intimate and expressive in their relationships and yet, reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Because our survey intended to measure perceptions of one's own intimacy, emotionality, and satisfaction in a relationship – not their partner's – another survey could be created with duplicate statements asking participants to assess how they felt about their partner as well.

Conclusions

The survey results disproved the hypothesis put forth as there was a slightly negative correlation between verbal emotional expression and relationship satisfaction in men. However, our findings provided greater insight into each gender's perceptions of their own intimacy and emotional expression within their relationships. Since gender communication is a specialized field of study that focuses on the way gendered beings communicate, our results have raised questions that could potentially assist in other research opportunities. Our findings are valuable in furthering our understanding of gender communication.

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Appendix

Survey

Age

Sex

Female

Male

Relationship Type

Dating

Casual “friends with benefits”

Long distance

Engaged

Month(s) in relationship

Please respond to the following statements by selecting the answer that best matches your feelings

- How well does your partner meet your needs?
- In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
- How good is your relationship compared to most?
- How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?*
- To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
- How much do you love your partner?
- How many problems are there in your relationship?*

- I am actively supportive of my partner's well-being.
 - I have a warm relationship with my partner.
 - I am able to count on my partner in times of need.
 - My partner is able to count on me in times of need.
 - I am willing to share myself and my possessions with my partner.
 - I receive considerable emotional support from my partner.
 - I give considerable emotional support to my partner.
 - I communicate well with my partner.
 - I value my partner greatly in my life.
 - I feel close to my partner.
 - I have a comfortable relationship with my partner.
 - I feel that I really understand my partner.
 - I feel that my partner really understands me.
 - I feel that I can really trust my partner.
 - I share deeply personal information about myself with my partner.
-
- Hold Hands
 - Kiss on lips
 - Kiss on cheeks
 - Give massages
 - Put arm around shoulder
 - Hug each other
 - Sit close to each other
 - Look into each other's eyes
 - Wink at each other
 - Say "you're a good friend"
 - Say "I like you"
 - Say "I love you"

- Say “you’re my best friend”
- Say how important relationship is
- Help each other with problems
- Acknowledge each other’s birthday
- Share private information
- Give each other compliments
- Praise each other’s accomplishments

*Questions were reverse coded