



Couple Conflict Narratives: Negative Emotion, Break-up Anxiety & Perspective Taking Predict Strategy Use

Candice Feiring, Elisa Liang & Emily McMahon
The College of New Jersey

Charles Cleland
New York University



Purpose

By examining narratives about romantic conflicts, we hoped to gain insight into aspects of emotion related meaning making that might inhibit or promote healthy conflict strategies.

Goal 1: Examine couple members negative emotion in narrative based indicators of romantic conflict and associations with conflict strategies.

Goal 2: Understand whether the emotion related processes of break-up anxiety (BUA) and empathetic perspective taking (Ptake) would also help explain the use of conflict strategies.

Beyond negative emotions, BUA, associated with emotional difficulties, might exacerbate negative interpretations of conflict and heighten the tendency to rely on destructive strategies. Ptake, associated with emotional distance, may foster more understanding and weaken the tendency to rely on destructive in favor of constructive strategies.

Predictions

Actor effects: Couple members negative emotion indicators (angry and sad words, ratings and pitch-an indicator of emotional arousal) & BUA would be related to their own reports of more negative and less positive strategies; Ptake would be associated with more positive and less negative strategies.

Partner effects: In the same direction such that partners negative emotion, BUA and Ptake would be related to the actors (self) reports of conflict strategies.

Method

Sample: 123 heterosexual couples, 33% minority, *M* Age 19.66 years (*SD*=1.11), *M* relationship length of 15.60 mo. (*SD*=12.20).

Narrative-based measures of angry and sad words, pitch range, break-up anxiety and empathetic perspective taking: Semi-structured interview asked each couple member separately to talk about times when their partner did not meet their needs. Interviewers asked a series of questions to understand what happened, how the speaker felt, and how their partner felt during conflict.

Angry and Sad Word Counts: extracted from transcribed narratives using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count software with a specialized dictionary and counting approach.

Pitch Range: obtained from interview recordings of the narratives by measuring the F_0 (fundamental frequency) of vocal sound waves in cycles per second (cps, Hertz) using the Praat software.

Break-up Anxiety (concerns about the viability of the relationship) and **Empathetic Perspective Taking** (understanding the partner viewpoint): Inter-rater reliability between two coders on 32 narratives was acceptable for **BUA** and **Ptake** (intraclass correlations, random, absolute method = .72 and .81).

Emotion Ratings: Following the conflict narration, couple members rated the degree to which they felt angry and sad (CERF, Sanford, 2007b)

Conflict Strategies: An online administered survey post interview assessed verbal aggression, (CIRQ; Wolfe et al., 2001) conflict engagement, withdrawal and positive problem solving (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994).

Descriptive Results

Analyses took into account the dyadic structure of the couple data; our dyads are empirically and conceptually distinguishable by gender. The results of paired sample *t*-tests/McNemar chi-squares for dependent samples are shown in Table 1 (bolded means/% = gender differences $p < .05$ or less).

Table 1: Mean Differences in Study Variables by Couple Member Gender	COUPLE MEMBERS			
	Female Partner		Male Partner	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
ANGER				
WORDS	4.62	4.82	3.78	4.27
RATINGS*	4.40	1.07	3.78	1.17
SADNESS				
WORDS	1.73	2.29	1.40	1.93
RATINGS*	4.15	1.17	3.33	1.12
PITCH RANGE*	242.00	17.90	215.00	28.30
CONFLICT STRATEGIES				
CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT*	1.87	.80	1.69	.66
VERBAL AGGRESSION*	1.74	.49	1.62	.46
WITHDRAW*	2.25	.85	2.06	.70
POS PROBLEM SOLVE*	4.23	.61	4.08	.57
EMOTION-RELATES PROCESS	% Yes	N	% Yes	N
BREAK-UP ANXIETY*	32.50	40	18.70	23
PERSPECTIVE TAKING	35.00	43	39.80	49

To reduce the number of variables in the main analyses, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used to combine indicators of negative emotion (angry and sad words and ratings; pitch was used as a separate variable) and destructive conflict strategies (conflict engagement, verbal aggression, withdrawal) into two summary factors.

Actor-Partner Models

Two separate mixed-effects regression models using the lme4 R package estimated associations between the summary destructive strategies factor (model 1) and positive problem solving (model 2) with actor and partner negative emotion (summary factor), pitch range, breakup anxiety, and perspective taking, while controlling for couple member gender. We explored the possibility of two-way interactions between gender and each of the other variables. None of these interaction effects were statistically significant.

Table 2: APIM Model (standard beta- continuous vars/Cohen d-categorical vars)		DESTRUCTIVE STRATEGIES	POSITIVE PROBLEM SOLVING
NEGATIVE EMOTION FACTOR	ACTOR	.61***	.08
	PARTNER	.03	.01
PITCH RANGE	ACTOR	.03	.15*
	PARTNER	-.02	.08
BREAK-UP ANXIETY	ACTOR	.11	-.23
	PARTNER	.27*	-.30 [†]
PERSPECTIVE TAKING	ACTOR	-.22*	.25 [†]
	PARTNER	-.20 [†]	.05
GENDER		.02	-.16

Conclusions

In recollecting specific conflict events, couple members negative emotions were a salient part of the meaning making process.

Beyond negative emotion, partners and not actors BUA helped explain strategy use. Perhaps couple members who used more destructive and less constructive strategies engaged in more negative couple interactions that made their partners feel uncertain about the relationship. Alternatively, couple members own feelings of BUA might be experienced as more controllable and therefore less threatening.

Couple members own perspective taking, and to a marginal extent their partners, were related to reports of less destructive strategy use beyond what was explained by negative emotion and BUA.

Unexpectedly, couple members own pitch was related to their own greater use of more positive problem solving. Greater arousal in the context of telling relationship stories to a non-judgmental interviewer could be adaptive if it was related to the willingness to share vulnerabilities around unmet needs and the desire to figure out the problem.