

Couples Research & Therapy *NEWSLETTER*

The Newsletter of the Couples Research & Therapy ABCT–SIG, Fall 2012

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Communication of Emotion During Conflict: The Brief Report

Keith Sanford
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Couples often experience intense negative emotions during conflict interactions. These emotions are not merely feelings that partners experience privately, but also feelings that partners may express overtly, and feelings they may perceive in each other. In other words, emotions can be communicated (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). This is important because partners have different types of reactions to perceiving different types of emotion in each other. Perceptions of partner emotion can influence how people behave during conflict (Sanford, 2007a), what types of underlying concerns they have (Sanford & Grace, 2011), and the extent to which conflicts are resolved (Sanford, 2007b). Accordingly, current approaches to couples' therapy often include components designed to help couples alter problematic patterns of emotion communication (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). How, then, does the process of emotion communication work? The answer to this question is not simple, and it requires attention to three key issues.

Encoding and decoding

The first issue is that emotion communication is a process that includes elements of both encoding and decoding (Noller, 2006). Emotion **encoding** occurs when a person overtly expresses an emotion that he or she is feeling. A clearly encoded emotion can be defined as one that is expressed with sufficient clarity so that it is recognized by outside observers. In contrast, emotion **decoding via objective observation** occurs when a person recognizes an emotion that was expressed overtly by his or her partner. This can be defined as perceiving the same emotion in a partner as that which is perceived by outside observers. Finally, emotion **decoding via insider perspective** occurs when a person recognizes an emotion in a partner even though the partner failed to express the emotion overtly. This can be defined as recognizing in a

Letter from the Editors

We are pleased to bring you this edition of the Couples SIG newsletter. Our apologies to the Markman/Stanley/Rhoades lab as their lab update did not make it into the Spring edition. You can find out what they've been up to on page 10.

We would like to thank Keith Sanford for submitting his multifaceted and interesting article. For this newsletter we asked for submissions exploring the role of emotions during couples' interactions.

As always, we invite you to let us know your feedback as well as ideas and suggestions for upcoming SIG newsletters. Please let us know if you would be interested in contributing to the newsletter by submitting your manuscript or a review of a recently published book!

We look forward to seeing you in National Harbor!

Tatiana & Judith

partner an emotion that could not be detected by outside observers. In considering these different components of encoding and decoding, we can ask a basic question. To what extent does the accuracy of emotion communication depend on each of these components?

Types of emotion

The second issue pertains to distinctions between types of emotion. Although couples experience many different emotions during conflicts, two types of negative emotion are especially common. These are sometimes called **hard emotion** (feeling angry and annoyed) and **soft emotion** (feeling sad and hurt). People have different reactions to perceiving each of these types of emotion in a partner, and moreover, the expression of each emotion predicts different outcomes in couples' therapy (Cordova, Jacobson, & Christensen, 1998; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). This raises two questions. First, are couples able to make accurate distinctions between these emotions in both encoding and decoding? Second, does the presence of one emotion influence how the other is expressed or perceived? For example, if a person feels both hard and soft emotion, will that person express both emotions or only a single dominant emotion?

Levels of analysis

The third issue is that emotion communication can potentially occur at different levels. For example, an **event-specific** emotion pertains to the emotion that one person experiences at a particular point in time. In contrast, **contextual-couple** emotion pertains to the average emotion experienced by both partners in a relationship over a period of time. Thus, if anger were assessed in two different episodes of conflict from both members of a couple, this would produce four event-specific anger scores (two for each partner) and a single contextual-couple score (the average of the four event-specific scores). At which level, then, do partners express and perceive emotion? For example, if a husband experiences a particular emotion during a conflict, will he express the event-specific emotion he feels at that particular moment in time, or will he express a contextual-couple emotion that matches the current climate in his relationship? And, will his wife perceive his event-specific emotion, or will she perceive a contextual-couple emotion?

Method

The following is a summary of a recent study (Sanford, 2012) that addressed the issues discussed above. In this study, a sample of 83

married couples completed two separate conflict conversations during a single assessment session at a communication laboratory. Prior to each conversation, an area of conflict was identified, and partners completed a questionnaire intended to activate relevant emotions. Next, partners independently rated their own hard and soft emotions regarding the identified conflict and then, together, partners engaged in a 10-minute, videotaped conversation about the conflict. After the conversation, partners rated each other's emotion. In addition, each conversation was scored for levels of hard and soft emotion by multiple observers. Each couple completed this entire procedure two times, in regards to two different topics of conflict. This means that assessments were obtained for each partner, for each of two different episodes of conflict, and each assessment included: (a) self reported emotion, (b) observer ratings of emotion, and (c) partner's ratings of each other's emotion.

Data were analyzed using 3-level hierarchical linear modeling equations (where level 1 pertained to repeated measures of conflict incidents, level 2 pertained to individual persons, and level 3 pertained to couples), and each equation took the following basic form:

$$y_{ipc} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{100} (x_{ipc}) + \gamma_{001} (w_c) + e_{ipc} + u_{0pc} + \upsilon$$

where “ y_{ipc} ” is an outcome for conflict incident “ i ” from person “ p ” of couple “ c ,” “ x_{ipc} ” is an event-specific score on a predictor variable for incident “ i ” from person “ p ” of couple “ c ,” and “ w_c ” is the contextual couple score for that same predictor variable for couple “ c .” Each couple had four event-specific scores (x), and a single contextual couple score (w), which was the average of their four event-specific scores ($w = \bar{x}$). There are two key parameters of interest in this equation. First, γ_{100} indicates the pooled within-couple **event-specific** effect of variable “ x ” on outcome “ y .” Second, γ_{001} indicates the **contextual-couple** effect of variable “ w ” on outcome “ y ” after controlling for the event-specific effect of variable

“ x ” (or, using common HLM terminology, it is equal to a “between-couple effect” minus a “within-couple effect”). This means that the contextual-couple effects indicate the extent to which the whole context explains more than the individual parts. (For further details on these equations, see Sanford, 2012.)

Results Encoding

Emotion encoding was tested using equations in which observer ratings of expressed emotion were predicted from self-report ratings of both hard emotion and soft emotion. Results are reported in Table 1. All the encoding effects were significant, and most notably, the contextual-couple effects were particularly large. This suggests that couples tend to express emotions that match the general climate in their relationship as a whole (as assessed across two conversations that occurred on a single day), and they tend to suppress expression of emotions that fail to match that climate.

In addition to the encoding effects (which involve associations between self-report and observer ratings of the *same* emotion), Table 1 also lists cross-emotion effects (which involve associations between the two *different* types of emotion). In most cases, the encoding effects were significantly larger than the cross-emotion effects. Thus, people expressed emotion with a sufficient level of clarity that observers accurately distinguished between the types of emotions being experienced. One exception, however, was that presence of contextual-couple hard emotion reduced the expression of soft emotion.

Decoding via objective observation

Decoding via objective observation was tested using equations in which a person's perception of his or her partner's emotion was predicted from observer ratings of that partner's overt expression of emotion. Results are reported in Table 2.

Here, the decoding results were significant only at the event-specific level. Whereas the aforementioned encoding results indicated that couples primarily expressed contextual-couple emotion, these decoding results suggest that they perceived emotion at the event-specific level. Moreover, the event-specific effects were especially large for hard emotion. Interestingly, contextual-couple hard emotion reduced the perception of soft emotion, which was similar to the pattern of results for emotion encoding.

Decoding via insider perspective

Decoding via insider perspective was tested using equations in which a person's perception of his or her partner's emotion was predicted by that partner's actual self-reported emotion, after controlling for effects due to objective observation. Results are reported in Table 3. In contrast to other results from this study, most of the decoding effects in Table 3 were not significantly different from their corresponding cross-emotion effects. Thus, an insider perspective did not much help people distinguish between emotions. One exception, however, was that insider perspective enhanced people's ability to perceive event-specific soft emotion in their partners.

Conclusion

Couples were reasonably accurate in distinguishing between hard and soft emotion; however, emotion expression (encoding) and emotion perception (decoding) occurred at different levels. Couples perceived mostly event-specific emotions, whereas they expressed mostly contextual-couple emotions. The contextual-couple effect was strong in spite of the fact that it was assessed across only two conflict conversations in the context of a single

assessment session. The results are consistent with theories regarding sentiment override (Weiss, 1980), suggesting that the overall climate in a relationship is likely to influence responses to specific relationship events. Moreover, the results identify a specific point where this type of override is likely to occur. It occurs in the expression, but not so much in the perception, of emotion.

The results also suggest that hard emotion tends to be dominant. This is consistent with research showing that people are quick to perceive overt expressions of threatening emotions in others (Hansen & Hansen, 1988). In the present study, couples easily perceived hard emotion when it was expressed overtly, hard emotion generally produced the largest effects, and it tended to override the expression and the perception of soft emotion. In contrast, soft emotion was more subtle, and couples sometimes relied upon an insider perspective to perceive it.

Taken together, the results highlight the importance of contextual-couple hard emotion. When contextual-couple hard emotion was high, couples tended to amplify the expressions of hard emotion and to suppress both the expression and the perception of soft emotion. Conversely, when contextual-couple hard emotion was low, couples tended to suppress the expression of hard emotion, and because the perception of hard emotion depended largely on overt expression, they may have been unlikely to perceive this suppressed hard emotion in each other. In sum, the results suggest that, in both research and clinical work with couples, it may be especially valuable to distinguish between levels of analysis, and specifically to assess and address the extent to which relationships have climates of contextual-couple hard emotion.

Table 1.
Emotion experience predicting overt expression

Outcome variable	Self Reported Event-Specific		Self Reported Contextual-Couple	
	Hard	Soft	Hard	Soft
Observed hard	.12*	.01	.42*	-.19
Observed soft	-.08	.18*	-.35*	.29*

Adjacent coefficients in **bold** significantly differ from each other. Coefficients are based on standardized scales. Equations control for gender and relationship satisfaction.

* $p < .05$

Table 2.
Emotion expression predicting partner's perception

Outcome variable	Observer Rating of Expressed Event-Specific		Observer Rating of Expressed Contextual-Couple	
	Hard	Soft	Hard	Soft
Partner perception hard	.49*	.04	.10	-.15
Partner perception soft	.11	.22*	-.23*	.09

Adjacent coefficients in **bold** significantly differ from each other. Coefficients are based on standardized scales. Equations control for insider perspective, gender, and relationship satisfaction.

* $p < .05$

Table 3.
Emotion experience predicting partner's perception controlling for overt expression

Outcome variable	Self Reported Event-Specific		Self Reported Contextual-Couple	
	Hard	Soft	Hard	Soft
Partner perception hard	.01	.03	.26*	.21
Partner perception soft	-.14*	.20*	.28*	.17

Adjacent coefficients in **bold** significantly differ from each other. Coefficients are based on standardized scales. Equations control for overt emotion expression, gender, and relationship satisfaction.

* $p < .05$

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Letter from the SIG Co-Presidents

Robin Barry¹ & Steffany Fredman²

¹University of Maryland Baltimore County,

²Massachusetts General Hospital

Greetings all! We're looking forward to the upcoming conference in National Harbor and seeing the outstanding research conducted by the Couples SIG members showcased at the Symposia, Poster Sessions, and SIG exposition.

We hope that you will be able to join us in kicking off the conference with the **Couples SIG preconference event** from 6:30-8:00 PM on Thursday, November 15 at the Gaylord National Hotel (room National Harbor 14). We're delighted that Dr. Deborah Capaldi, Senior Scientist from the Oregon Social Learning Center, will be our guest speaker this year. Her talk is entitled, "The Development and Dynamics of Intimate Partner Violence," and we look forward to an interesting and informative presentation.

Our **SIG Business Meeting** will be bright and early from 8:00 to 9:30 am on Friday, November 16th (National Harbor 6). We will be holding an election for the position of Treasurer and would like to extend our thanks to Meghan McGinn, who has done an outstanding job in this role over the previous two years. Please start thinking about nominations for this position or let Steffany or Robin know if you would like to be nominated.

We will also be discussing SIG business and presenting the Robert L. Weiss Student Poster Award during the meeting. If you have announcements or agenda items for the meeting, please contact Steffany (sfredman@partners.org) or Robin (rbarry@umbc.edu).

See you in National Harbor!

Treasurer's Update

Dear SIG Members,

I hope it has been a happy and productive year for you all! I'm looking forward to seeing many of you at ABCT.

We have added 41 new members since our last update, and our dues-paying membership (members who have paid dues within the last 5 years) is currently at 181 (63 professionals and 118 students). I would like to extend a very warm welcome to our newest members and encourage all of you to spread the word to your colleagues about the Couples SIG!

Presently, our SIG balance is \$648.10. Our balance at the last update was \$770.86. Since then we have collected \$1605 in dues and donations. This year, we have spent \$1727.76 on the conference expenses, new projector, and renewal of our web domain. As you can see, we are over-budget on the year, spending more than we have collected in dues. So, if you have not paid your 2011 dues yet, it is very important that you do!

As always, we will collect dues for 2012 at our SIG business meeting during the ABCT conference. If you are not attending the conference or would like to pre-pay your 2012 dues, please pay electronically via PayPal (go to www.paypal.com and send money to meghanmcginn@gmail.com) or by mailing a check to the address below. If you pay by paypal, it is important to designate the payment as a "gift" to avoid processing fees. Dues are \$25 for professional members and \$5 for students, post-docs, and retired members.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or concerns about dues or membership.

Many thanks for your support of the SIG!

Best,
Meghan

Send checks to:
Meghan McGinn, M.A.
VA Puget Sound Healthcare System
1660 S Columbian Way (116-MHC)
Seattle, WA 98108

Letter from the Student Co-Presidents

Lisa Benson¹ & Emily Georgia²

1 University of California, Los Angeles, 2 University of Miami

Hello from your Student Co-Presidents! The ABCT convention is right around the corner, and we hope to see all of you in National Harbor.

We are excited to announce that this year's **Couples SIG Cocktail Party** will be at Thai Pavilion, a four-minute walk from the conference hotel (151 American Way, www.thaipavilionnationalharbor.com). We will be meeting from 6:30 to 8:00 PM on Saturday, November 17 (immediately following Dr. Klepac's Presidential Address). Come chat, network, and catch up!

Due to unexpected expenses this year, unfortunately the SIG will not be able to pay for light refreshments as we usually do. We are hoping you might be willing to donate to the cause of having a few appetizers available for all who attend (particularly those of you who are in more senior positions). We will "pass the hat" during the SIG business meeting on Friday morning.

In accordance with tradition, we would also like to invite all students to an informal **Student Cocktail Hour** in the Thai Pavilion bar area immediately following the main party. This event is a great opportunity to get to know your fellow undergraduate and graduate students better.

While we will not be holding a SIG student symposium this year, we are delighted to highlight the contributions of the SIG's students to other ABCT symposia. We hope that in addition to attending all the other wonderful contributions by SIG members to this year's convention, you will attend the following symposia involving SIG students:

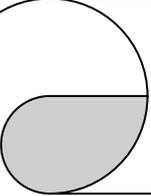
- Friday at 10.00 am: "*Marriage Checkup: Do Annual Checkups Improve Relationship Health Outcomes?*"
 - James Cordova, Melinda Ippolito Morrill, Tatiana Gray, CJ Eubanks Fleming, Julia Sollenberger, Ellen Darling, and Howard Markman
 -
- Friday at 12.00 pm: "*Couples and Psychopathology: Beyond Relationship Distress*"
 - Shiri Cohen, Donald Baucom, Sara Boeding, Steffany Fredman, and Douglas Snyder

Please contact us at any time with comments, questions, or suggestions. We would particularly like to encourage students to join the **SIG listserv** (couples-sig@sfu.ca), **SIG Facebook group** (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=266082574771>), **student-specific Facebook group**, (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=82988514892>), and **student Google discussion group** (<http://groups.google.com/group/couplessig-students>).

We hope to see you soon!

Sincerely,

Lisa (lbenson1@ucla.edu) and *Emily* (egeorgia@psy.miami.edu)



KUDOS!!!

We'd like to celebrate these special events in the lives of the following Siggers. Congratulations to you!

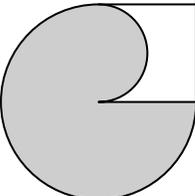
☺ A special edition of *Prevention Science* was published in August entitled "The Development and Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence" with **Deborah M. Capaldi** and **Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling** as co-editors. The papers were based on a plenary symposium at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research in 2009. Commentaries included Donald Dutton, Debra Pepler, and Andra Teten-Tharp. They hope that the articles will stimulate further work in prevention in this important area of family violence, as well as policy changes and changes in treatment approaches.

☺ A comprehensive database on domestic violence research [Partner Abuse State of the Knowledge project (PASK)] was just published with **John Hamel** as editor-in-chief. The goal is to make the best information possible available regarding intimate partner violence to treatment providers and others who do not have ready access to journals, and for whom trying to synthesize the information available is an impossible task. **Jennifer Langhinrichsen Rohling** and **Denise Hines** worked with him on editing this project (as well as contributing reviews). Please see the flyer at the end of the newsletter.

☺ Along with his family, **David Atkins** is currently spending three months at University of Zurich with Dr. Guy Bodenmann, which he finds both fantastically fun as well as interesting to see all the creative research being done by our Swiss colleagues.

☺ **Ranak Trevedi** at the University of Washington was recently awarded a Career Development Award from the VA Health Services Research and Development division (the VA K-award equivalent) that aims to develop a couples coping and self-management intervention for Veterans with congestive heart failure and their significant others. The title is "Developing a Couples' Coping Intervention for Veterans with Heart Failure" and the dates are 4/1/2012-3/31/2017. (PI: Ranak Trivedi, PhD)

☺ This past summer, *Family Violence and Family Problems: Reliable Assessment and the ICD-11* edited by SIG members **Heather Foran, Ph.D.**, **Steven Beach, Ph.D.**, **Amy Smith Slep, Ph.D.**, **Richard Heyman, Ph.D.**, and **Marianne Wamboldt, M.D.**, was released by Springer. Many SIG members contributed to the chapters. <http://www.springerpub.com/product/9780826109101#.UE39iES5KdY>



Jesse Owen, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Educational and Counseling
Psychology
University of Louisville

Currently, lab members are seeing couples for therapy as part of a study examining the impact of commitment uncertainty across sessions. Specifically, doctoral student therapists engage in therapy with couples while gathering information about the therapeutic alliance, couple commitment, and relationship satisfaction as well as a host of other variables at other time-points.

Manuscripts in preparation focus on individuals and couples in relationship education programs, and in couple therapy. Two manuscripts currently in preparation for submission examine the relationship between the therapeutic alliance, client gender, and pre-therapy relationship distress – one paper examining these associations within the couple-therapy modality and the other within a couple relationship education program.

Relatedly, a third study in preparation examines predictors of break-up status for individuals in a relationship education program. Finally, a dismantling-study manuscript has been submitted which specifically evaluates the effects of the assumed active ingredient within most relationship education programs – structured communication.

Recently submitted manuscripts include "Not Everyone Enjoys a Hookup. Diverse Reactions to Hooking Up" which utilized a cluster analysis to examine characteristics of individuals with differing reactions to a casual sexual experience. We have also submitted a manuscript exploring a more in-depth analysis of women's reactions to casual sexual experiences as it relates to interpersonal and academic variables.

Current projects in data-collection phase include a study examining workplace romance and the effects on occupational outcomes, a study investigating cultural client factors related to psychotherapy attrition, and a study examining the role of attachment and coping as they relate to danger sign recognition and commitment in video-vignette scenarios of romantic relationships.

James V. Córdova, Ph.D.

Professor of Psychology
Director: The Marriage Checkup Project
Department of Psychology
Clark University

We have completed seeing couples for the Marriage Checkup Project and we are currently working on writing a manuscript with the longitudinal outcome data of the study. We are also collaborating with Kristina Coop Gordon's lab to implement the Marriage Checkup (referred to in this case as a Relationship Checkup) in a community based integrative health-care facility in Tennessee.

Amanda Harp is loving the training (and weather) at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center while simultaneously preparing for the EPPP and job search in her home state of NC. Melinda Ippolito Morrill is currently applying for internship for the 2013-2014 year, as well as continuing to work on her dissertation about how the emotional tone in mothers' and fathers' relationships impacts their parenting. She is also completing practicum work at the UMass Memorial Outpatient Psychiatry Department. CJ Fleming is currently applying for internship and working on her dissertation, which focuses on the relationship between partner behaviors and alcohol-related help seeking in the context of intimate relationships. Ellen Darling has recently returned from maternity leave and is preparing her master's thesis, 'A New Conception of Intimacy: Pathways via which mindfulness affects relationship satisfaction'. Julia Sollenberger is working on submitting a manuscript on how emotional skillfulness impacts the intimacy process and marital satisfaction. She is also starting her dissertation which focuses on how couples' narratives can be used to predict treatment outcomes. Tatiana Gray is writing her master's thesis, which focuses on how couples transition out of conflict conversations. She is also completing practicum work at the UMass Memorial Outpatient Psychiatry Department. Finally, Matt Hawrilenko is working on validating a measure that assesses couples' collective financial efficacy, the sense that together, they can effectively accomplish money-related goals and navigate money-related hurdles.



2nd row: Tatiana Gray, James Córdova, Melinda Ippolito Morrill, CJ Fleming, 1st row: Ellen Darling & baby Natasha, Julia Sollenberger, Matt Hawrilenko

Markman/Stanley/Rhoades Lab

Department of Psychology
University of Denver

Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Galena Rhoades are collaborating on several projects in the Center for Marital and Family Studies at University of Denver. On the basic science side of research, funding from NICHD has just ended for our Relationship Development Study that followed 1600 unmarried individuals through relationship transitions and we are hoping to secure funding to follow them further. On the applied side, we're continuing NICHD-funded two studies on the long-term effectiveness of PREP with couples -- one in a community sample and the other in the military. For the latter project, we happily get to borrow Dr. Beth Allen from her own lab at University of Colorado, Denver to work with us as a co-investigator. We're also fortunate to report that Dr. Kristi Peterson joined our research team last spring as a post-doc and is working on several collaborations and grant writing. We have five current graduate students: Gretchen Kelmer recently defended her dissertation on Facebook and relationship quality and is on internship, Ben Loew is working on developing an online intervention for aging couples for his dissertation, Shelby Scott has begun her dissertation on relationship dynamics in lesbian couples, Aleja Parsons is finishing up her Master's on attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and cohabitation and relationship outcomes, and Kayla Knopp just started our program, but has already prepared a manuscript on commitment and individual functioning. The newest member of our lab is Emmett Cameron Rhoades who began his "work" with us in March 2012, but has yet to publish anything...

Lab Updates:

With all your new research ideas and grant proposals brewing, please start thinking about your updates for the Spring 2013 Newsletter. We'd love to hear from you!

Farewell from this Post

At last, we would like to thank you for all you've done to help us spread the news about the fascinating couples work being accomplished across the globe by our fellow SIGgers.

We wish you the best in all your endeavors and anticipate reading more about your research and projects in the next issues of our beloved newsletter.

Cheers,

Tatiana & Judith

HOT off the Press

In Press and Recently Published Literature

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