Ambivalence Over Emotional Expressiveness in Intimate Relationships: A Shift From an Individual Characteristic to Dyadic Attribute

Adital Ben-Ari and Yoav Lavee
University of Haifa

This study investigates how ambivalence over emotional expressiveness (AEE) relates to various aspects of intimate relationships, including perception of the relationship, marital satisfaction, and dyadic closeness. Whereas most commonly AEE has been treated as an individual attribute, we suggest looking at a combined measure of the AEE of both spouses as a dyadic attribute. We examine the contribution of each spouse’s level of AEE as well as joint couple AEE to explain variations in the marital relationship. Data were collected from both spouses of 226 Israeli couples. Findings indicated that the AEE of individuals was more predictive of lower relationship quality than neuroticism and that dyadic AEE explains relationship quality more than the AEE of individual partners. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

This article examines the construct of ambivalence over emotional expressiveness (AEE) within the context of intimate relationships. In particular, it seeks to investigate how conflict over emotional expressiveness relates to various aspects of intimate relationships, including perception of the relationship, closeness, and marital satisfaction. Most commonly, AEE has been perceived as a stable trait of individuals (King & Emmons, 1990); in this study, however, we look at the AEE of both spouses and treat it as a dyadic characteristic of individual attribute (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005) to assess how this joint construct can predict intimate relationships.

Emotional Expressiveness

A key element of emotional communication and meta-emotion is the expression of emotions. Although emotions can be experienced and not expressed, the expression of emotions provides others with access to them and enables people to influence relationships (Collier, 1985; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). The term emotional expressiveness is used in two different ways—to represent those aspects of behavior that people intentionally employ in order to convey their feelings to others (Collier, 1985; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999) and to describe those aspects of behavior that are not intentionally controlled, but from which people can infer another’s emotions (Collier, 1985).

Research has documented the importance of emotional expressiveness in a wide range of interpersonal processes (Gross & John, 1998; Sullivan, 1991). Though findings suggest opposite views regarding the relations between expression of emotions and well-being (Katz & Campbell, 1994; King, 1993; King & Emmons, 1990, 1991), for the most part, emotional expressiveness has been thought to contribute to healthy functioning, both physically and mentally.

This line of thinking has dominated both clinical and social psychology (Goleman, 1995; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999; Pennebaker, 1995). It has shaped the conceptualizations of modern psychotherapies and therapeutic encounters, which leads one to conclude that the ability to express emotions is not only indicative of well-functioning but also of promoting well-functioning. Indeed, there is empirical evidence attesting not only to the beneficial effects of emotional expressiveness (Harker & Keltner, 2001) but also to the deleterious effect of blocking such expression (Berry & Pennebaker, 1993; Traue & Pennebaker, 1993).

The nature of interpersonal relationships is significant for understanding experiences, expressions, and interpretation of emotions: Beliefs about relationships may relate to the emotional experience and its expression in much the same way as the expression of emotion may shape the nature of a relationship (Clark & Brissette, 2000). Within the context of intimate relationship, one partner’s emotional expressiveness may lead to greater satisfaction with the relationship on the part of the other spouse. The sharing of emotions serves to generate a sense of closeness and trust in the other spouse as a confidant (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2008). Indeed, emotional expressiveness, especially spouses’ ratings of each other’s expressiveness, was found to be positively correlated with marital satisfaction (King, 1993). At

This study was supported in part by a grant from the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 917/04).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Adital Ben-Ari, Social Welfare & Health Sciences, School of Social Work, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel. Electronic mail may be sent to adital@research.haifa.ac.il.
the same time, people tend to express their emotions, both negative and positive, when they feel safe and secure. Thus, a satisfactory relationship is likely to enhance the expression of emotions.

In contrast, there is evidence suggesting that the expression of emotions is unhealthy and may lead to harmful results for individuals as well as for their interpersonal relationships. For example, research on Type A personality indicates the unhealthy ramifications of expressiveness (Friedman, Harris, & Hall, 1984). Likewise, intensive emotional expressiveness may cause physiological arousal (Lang, 1988, 1994), which is often associated with mental health problems (Taylor & Seeman, 1999; Zuckerman, 2001). In addition, the expression of emotions may cause hurt, disappointment, and rejection and thus threaten systems of interpersonal relationship (Cain, 1991).

In view of these opposing views, it is reasonable to assume that emotional expressiveness per se cannot fully distinguish between adaptive or unadaptive behaviors or expressive style. In this regard, Pennebaker (1985) has suggested that conflict between the desire to express emotions and the inability to do so is the core of the problem. Thus, it is not the lack of emotional expressiveness that is considered unhealthy but rather the processes that are linked with expression or inhibition (Friedman et al., 1984). Hence, expression in and of itself is not the key to well-being and relationship satisfaction; how one feels about one’s expressive behaviors is what determines the potentially harmful character of lack of expression.

In light of this conceptualization, King and Emmons (1990) coined the term ambivalence over emotional expressiveness to designate the experience of ambivalence over the style of expression of emotion regardless of the style itself. They suggested that this construct is significant in understanding the relations between the style of emotional expressiveness and physical and mental well-being. Ambivalence over emotional expressiveness refers to different experiences: Individuals may regret too much expressiveness; or desire to express themselves without being able to do so; or express emotions without wanting to do so. Hence, they could be either expressive or inexpressive and still be conflicted over their style of emotional expressiveness. In all these situations, it is the conflict component associated with the expression of emotions that appears as the significant construct (Chen, Cheung, Bond, & Leung, 2005; Mongrain & Vettese, 2003). Indeed, accumulated empirical evidence shows that AEE is a better predictor of various aspects of well-being and distress than is emotional expressiveness (King & Emmons, 1990, 1991).

With regard to systems of interpersonal relationships, an underlying assumption related to AEE is that showing one’s feelings could lead to negative interpersonal outcomes (it had been understood as a conflict between intimacy and self-protection, which is essential to understanding close relationships; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). There is evidence suggesting that ambivalent individuals are less likely to benefit from social support, and they report receiving little sympathy and social support from others (Emmons & Colby, 1995). This inability to benefit from social support may also explain results showing that ambivalent individuals are less satisfied with their marriage (King, 1993; King & Emmons, 1991; Tucker, Winkelman, Katz, & Bermas, 1999).

In a recent study of AEE within the context of romantic relationship, Mongrain and Vettese (2003) found that highly ambivalent women reported suppressing their negative feelings by holding back their anger towards their partners during conflict situations, which eventually resulted in less positive communication. In addition, they found that communicative style was unclear, as there was little congruence between verbal and nonverbal communication, which led to frustration and confusion among the women’s male partners. This type of expression created further confusion among the ambivalent women because they experienced difficulties reading their partners’ emotions. Indeed, it was found that highly ambivalent individuals tend to read too much into emotional expressiveness ensuing from a complicated interpersonal context (King, 1998). Such difficulties in communication between intimate partners may result in limited sharing, closeness, and intimacy and contribute significantly to relationship deterioration and dissatisfaction. Mongrain and Vettese (2003) concluded that expressing nonconflictual stances towards emotional expressiveness is of primary importance not only to a personal sense of urgency but also to a sense of empowerment in relationships. Further, sharing of emotions with close partners is essential for the establishment and maintenance of dyadic closeness, thus contributing to the quality of intimate relationships (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2008).

King and Emmons (1990) developed their Ambivalence over Emotional expressiveness Questionnaire (AEQ) as an individual difference measure of the internal conflict of emotional expressiveness. It is generally studied as a stable trait, often associated with personality attributes of the individual, that exerts long-term impact on well-being (Katz & Campbell, 1994; King & Emmons, 1990, 1991; Mongrain & Zuroff, 1994). A great deal of research on the quality of marital relationships has linked marriage quality with the personality traits of the marital partners. The general notion is that one’s personality may shape the way one expresses and interprets emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and interpersonal interactions. This process, in turn, leads to a global perception of the intimate relationship and marital satisfaction. In the same vein, one’s evaluation of the relationship is associated with the spouse’s personality. Researchers have examined the role of a number of personality traits as predictors of the marital relationship. Most often, marital quality has been associated with spouses’ attachment style (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005; Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002; for review), neuroticism (Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kurdek, 1991, 1997), and other Big Five (i.e., openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) personality traits (Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Kelly & Conley, 1987).
For the most part, neuroticism has been treated as an individual characteristic in predicting the marital relationship. Previous research has shown that level of neuroticism is the most consistent and powerful personality predictor of relationship outcomes (Bouchard et al., 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Because spouses provide for each other the environment in which they operate, if one spouse is characterized by a high level of neuroticism, it is likely that everything in that spouse’s environment—including marital events, the partner, and marital interactions—will be colored by negative emotionality (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005). Thus, both spouses’ levels of neuroticism affect each other’s perceptions of marital quality (Bouchard et al., 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1995, 1997; Kurdek, 1991).

Thus far, most research has linked the marital relationship to each of the spouses’ personality traits. However, there is reason to believe that the relationship is shaped by specific combinations of the partners’ personalities. This view stems from the first tenet of systems theory, namely, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Byng-Hall, 1999) and that partners provide the environment for one another, thus mutually affecting each other (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002; Pistole, 1994). It could therefore be argued that both attachment security and neuroticism are characteristics of the relationship (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005).

**This Study**

In this study, we examine the AEE of both spouses as a dyadic characteristic. In this regard, relationships may be characterized by three broad types of dyadic-level AEE: (a) high AEE (both spouses characterized by high level of AEE expression), (b) low AEE (both spouses characterized by low levels of AEE), and (c) mixed (one spouse characterized by a high level and the other by a low level AEE).

We then examine the relationship between AEE as a dyadic construct and various outcomes of intimate relationships, including perception of the relationship, marital satisfaction, and dyadic closeness. We also examine the interrelationship between neuroticism and AEE and the extent to which they explain variations in marital outcomes. We expect that marital outcomes will be associated with both neuroticism and AEE, and that dyadic AEE will explain marital outcomes more strongly than the spouses’ AEE.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample for the present study is part of a larger project examining emotional transmission and marital relationships in couples in which one spouse serves in an emergency unit. Data were collected from both spouses in 226 couples (63 firefighters, 118 paramedics, and 45 social workers in hospital emergency teams). Participants were informed that the study addressed everyday experiences of people serving in emergency units.

Partners had been living together for an average of 13.8 years ($SD = 10.5$). The mean number of children per couple was 2.8 ($SD = 2.0$). The age of women ranged from 23 to 66 ($M = 39.1$, $SD = 9.8$). The average educational level was 14.5 years ($SD = 2.5$) for women and 14.0 years ($SD = 2.4$) for men.

**Procedure and Instruments**

Trained interviewers visited the couples in their homes and administered the questionnaires to each partner. Interviewers remained in the home while the questionnaires were being completed in order to ensure that the spouses answered the questions independently.

**Ambivalence over emotional expressiveness (AEE).** Ambivalence over emotional expressiveness was measured by the AEQ (King & Emmons, 1990), a 28-item scale measuring conflict over one’s emotional expressiveness style. Items on the AEQ pertain to wanting to express emotion and being unable to do so, as well as to expressing emotion and later regretting it. In the present study, we included only the 12 items reflecting conflict over the expression of negative emotions. Sample items include, “I want to express my emotions honestly, but I am afraid that it may cause me embarrassment or hurt,” and “Often I’d like to show others how I feel, but something seems to be holding me back” (King & Emmons, 1990). Items are rated on a 5-point scale, with high scores indicating higher conflict over expression. The Cronbach alphas were .87 and .88 for men and women, respectively.

**Neuroticism.** To measure neuroticism, we used the short-scale measure of the Big Five Inventory (BFI–S) adopted from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP; Dehne & Schupp, 2007; Gerlitz & Schupp, 2005; Lang, 2005; Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008). The BFI–S measures the Big Five dimensions of personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) with three items per dimension, each measured on a 7-point scale ranging from do not at all agree to fully agree. Factor analyses clearly replicated the Big Five factors (Dehne & Schupp, 2007). The analyses also produced a satisfactory reliability estimate, and showed strong empirical indications for the validity of the concept of the Big Five personality dimensions. In the current study, we include only the measure of neuroticism. For this subscale, Lang (2005) reported coefficient alphas of .68 and .74 in two studies, with a test–retest correlation of $r = .80$.

**Marital quality.** Aspects of marital quality were measured using three instruments. Perception of the marital relationship was measured by an instrument based on the Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), which asks people to indicate their perceptions of a particular concept on a 7-point scale anchored by two opposite adjectives. In the present study, spouses were asked to rate how they felt about their marriage, using 15 adjective pairs (e.g., bad–good; satisfied–dissatisfied; unpleasant–pleasant). Internal consistencies were .84 for wives and .82 for husbands (for a similar approach, see Davila, Bradbury, & Fincham, 1998; Fisher & McNulty, 2008; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991).

**Marital satisfaction** was measured by a single item that asked respondents to rate their overall satisfaction with the marital
relationship on a 6-point scale. This item was part of a 5-item measure that taps satisfaction with various aspects of life, including family, work, relationship with the children, and satisfaction with life in general. 

Dyadic closeness was measured by a graphic representation of a couple (male and female figures) in five degrees of spatial proximity ranging from clearly separated to very close. Respondents were asked to check the couple figure that best represents their dyadic closeness.

The three measures correlated significantly with each other \((r = .62\) to \(r = .73\); see Table 4). A principal component factor analysis indicated that they all loaded on a single factor, with an eigenvalue of 2.35 and that explained 78.4% of the variance. Therefore, we created a Marital Quality Index, based on factor scores, with a mean 0.0 and standard deviation 1.0, where higher scores designate higher perception of the marital quality.

Plan of Analysis

We analyzed the data in three stages. First, we conducted an agglomerative cluster analysis to delineate types of couples based on both spouses’ levels of AEE. We then examined differences between couple-AEE types in each of the outcome variables (husband’s and wife’s perception of the marriage, marital satisfaction, dyadic closeness, and couple relationship quality index). In the third stage, we conducted hierarchical regression analysis predicting relationship quality index by individual and by couple AEE.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, gender differences, and correlations between spouses. Significant correlations were found between partners in their perception of the marriage, marital satisfaction, and dyadic closeness \((r > .40, p < .01)\). Husbands reported significantly higher levels of closeness \((t = 3.16, p < .01)\) and greater marital satisfaction \((t = 2.42, p < .05)\) than their female counterparts, but there was no difference between spouses in their perception of the marriage. Wives scored significantly higher than their male counterparts on neuroticism \((t = 6.47, p < .01)\) and AEE \((t = 2.56, p < .05)\). There was no correlation between partners in neuroticism and only a small correlation \((r = .13)\) in their levels of AEE.

Couple AEE Types

To create a dyadic variable of AEE, we conducted a cluster analysis on husbands’ and wives’ scores on AEE. More specifically, we conducted an agglomerative hierarchical clustering procedure with squared Euclidean distance and a between-groups linkage. The agglomeration schedule indicated that four clusters best accounted for the data, with the agglomeration coefficients significantly decreasing afterward. We then conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with post hoc tests for differences among clusters in husbands’ and wives’ AEE. To increase our confidence in the findings, we set the significance level for the post hoc analyses at \(p < .01\). The findings (see Table 2) indicated that the four types of dyadic AEE were characterized as follows: (a) low AEE (both spouses had low scores on AEE), (b) wife’s AEE (the wife scored high and the husband scored low on AEE), (c) husband’s AEE (the husband scored high and the wife scored low on AEE), and (d) high AEE (both spouses had high scores on AEE). The findings in Table 2 further show that the four types differentiated significantly between the levels of wives’ AEE. For husbands, no difference was found in their AEE levels between those in Both Low and Male Low couple types, or between those in Both High and Male High couple types.

Differences Between Couple Types in Marital Relationships

To examine how marital relationships differ between the dyadic patterns of AEE, we conducted a MANOVA with all measures of male and female perceived marital relationships. We first conducted a MANOVA with repeated measures to account for husbands’ and wives’ dependent observations. Second, to examine differences among types, we conducted a MANOVA with post hoc tests, and set the level of significance at \(p < .01\). The findings are presented in Table 3.

The MANOVA with repeated measures showed a significant effect of couple type, \(F(3, 207) = 69997.87, p < .001\), but no significant gender effect, \(F(1, 209) = 1.87\), and no interaction effect of gender and type, \(F(3, 209) = 0.74\). Couples in which both spouses scored a high AEE had a significantly less positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Husbands ((n = 226))</th>
<th>Wives ((n = 226))</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of marriage</td>
<td>5.93 0.97</td>
<td>5.89 1.07</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>5.23 0.93</td>
<td>5.07 1.04</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>2.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>4.57 0.71</td>
<td>4.40 0.76</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>3.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality Index</td>
<td>−0.02 1.00</td>
<td>0.01 1.00</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>−0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEE</td>
<td>2.32 0.71</td>
<td>2.49 0.79</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>−2.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>3.04 0.97</td>
<td>3.66 1.01</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>−6.47**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. AEE = ambivalence over emotional expressiveness.

\(*p < .05, **p < .01.\)
perception of their marriage, lower marital satisfaction and dyadic closeness, and lower overall score of the marital relationship than couples in which one or both spouses scored low on AEE.

Predicting Relationship Quality by AEE

In the final stage, we examined the pattern of associations between neuroticism and AEE and the marital relationship variables and conducted a hierarchical regression analysis predicting relationship quality by AEE, neuroticism, and background variables.

Table 4 presents a correlation matrix of the study variables for husbands (below diagonal) and wives (above diagonal). The correlation coefficients reveal that for both husbands and wives, AEE was correlated higher than neuroticism with all measures of the marital relationship (i.e., perception of the marriage, marital satisfaction, dyadic closeness, and the relationship quality index).

The hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 5) was conducted on a couple relationship quality index as the dependent variable. Model 1 included background variables (i.e., relationship duration, relative income, and level of religiosity) as control...
variables. These variables explained only 1.5% of the variance of relationship quality. In Model 2 we added the spouses’ levels of neuroticism. These variables added significantly to the explained variance of the outcome variable \( F = 6.96, p < .01 \), and both spouses’ neuroticism was found to decrease relationship quality \( (\beta = -.19 \) and \( \beta = -.18, p < .01 \), for husbands and wives, respectively). In Models 3 and 4 we added the spouses’ levels of AEE in two ways. Model 3 included individual measures of husband’s and wife’s AEE, whereas Model 4 included a dummy variable to designate couples with high AEE. The findings show that both Model 3 and 4 added significantly to the explained variance of the outcome variable. Furthermore, in both models, AEE significantly explained a decrease in relationship quality while the effect of neuroticism became insignificant. These findings suggest that the effect of AEE on relationship quality is stronger than that of neuroticism.

Finally, the comparison of the latter two models reveals that a combined couple AEE predicts a decrease in relationship quality more strongly than the individual AEE levels of the spouses, as indicated by the explained variance \( (R^2) \) of these models and the estimates of \( F \) for change in \( R^2 \) over Model 2.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to examine the contribution of dyadic AEE to explaining marital relationships. Traditionally, AEE was considered as an attribute of the individual and was found to explain psychological and physical well-being (Emmons & Colby, 1995; King & Emmons, 1990, 1991; Pennebaker et al., 1987) as well as marital relationships (King, 1993; King & Emmons, 1991; Tucker et al., 1999). Given the predictive power of AEE in explaining individual and relationship outcomes, it is quite surprising that relatively little research has been done since the 1990s to further investigate how the construct is related to personal and couple dynamics. The current study attempted to fill this gap.

The innovative nature of this study was in conceptualizing and empirically examining AEE as a dyadic construct (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005) and its contribution to understanding variation in relationship quality. In addition, we tested the conceptual similarity between AEE and neuroticism (Katz & Campbell, 1994; King & Emmons, 1990) both in terms of the essence of the constructs and the nature of their associations with couple relationships.

As expected, the findings indicated that for both men and women, AEE is related to neuroticism: people high in neuroticism are more likely to present higher AEE. The findings also indicated that AEE of both spouses explained relationship quality. Furthermore, AEE appeared to be associated with lower relationship quality more strongly than neuroticism.

Perhaps the most important finding of the current study was that dyadic AEE is a stronger predictor of relationship quality than individual partners’ AEE and neuroticism. First, all measures of the marital relationship (i.e., perception of the marriage, marital satisfaction, dyadic closeness, and combined index of relationship quality) were significantly lower in couples in which both spouses scored high on AEE compared with couples in which both were low on AEE or those in which one spouse scored high and the other scored low on AEE. Second, the analysis indicated that dyadic AEE (i.e., both spouses show high levels of AEE) is the strongest predictor of relationship quality. It is worthwhile to note that the outcome measure in the prediction model was a combined index of three measures pertaining to different aspects of the marital relationship, which strengthens our confidence in these findings.

It appears that when both spouses tend to have conflicts about expressing negative emotions, it affects their modes of communication with each other. For example, if John withdraws when feeling distressed and refrains from expressing it, Claire may be frustrated at John’s withdrawal but hold back her bitterness. Both spouses would end up holding back the expression of negative emotions, their communication would be disrupted, and consequently, there would be emotional distance between the couple (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007).

The findings of the current study contribute to the body of knowledge in emphasizing the significance of AEE as an important attribute of the relationship. It also adds to our understanding of intimate relationships by highlighting the significance of shared constructed AEE as portrayed by both spouses. We suggest that AEE resides within the sphere of meta-emotions. The concept of meta-emotion refers to both thoughts and feelings about emotions (Gottman, 1999); it can be understood as a
second-order emotion about primary emotion (i.e., being afraid of one’s own anger). As such, it may lead to the repression or encouragement of specific emotions, which has implications for intimate relationships.

Whereas most research today has treated AEE at the individual level, future research should be directed toward exploring the links between dyadic-level AEE and psychological and physical well-being, as well as communication processes in intimate relationships. Another line of research may be directed to exploring the ways in which spouses influence each other’s expression, or how they adapt to each other’s mode of emotional expressiveness, by using such methods as Actor–Partner Interdependence models (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Family practitioners can utilize the findings of the current study in working with distressed couples on their conflicts about the expression of emotions in an effort to promote more open and less ambivalent modes of communication.

**Keywords:** couples; ambivalence over emotional expressiveness; dyadic closeness; neuroticism; intimate relationships; marital satisfaction

**References**


