

Emotion Labelling in Close Relationships

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This study investigated the convergence between open-ended descriptions of emotions and a taxonomy of 16 basic emotion labels proposed to be of particular relevance to couples within close nonmarital relationships. Seventy-one subjects (35 men and 36 women) were presented with 20 hypothetical relationship behaviours (10 positive and 10 negative). Five behaviours in each set of 10 were self-initiated, and five were partner-initiated. Subjects imagined each behaviour occurring in the context of their own relationship, and tape recorded their subsequent thoughts and feelings. Subjects then chose one of 16 emotion categories that best described their imagined emotional response to the behaviours. As predicted, emotion valency varied as a function of behaviour valency, and partner-initiated behaviours evoked a greater number of emotions than self-initiated behaviours. Open-ended emotion descriptions were later coded into the forced choice set of 16 emotion labels with high reliability achieved. However, although subjects' emotion descriptions and forced choice options attained reasonable convergent validity, various discrepancies suggested some revision to the proposed emotion taxonomy was required.

For the majority of human beings, a loving, intimate relationship with another person affords some of life's richest emotional experiences, both positive and negative. As Bowlby (1973) has commented, many of our most intense emotions are elicited during the initiation, maintenance and disruption of affectional bonds, while Shaver (1984) has characterised close relationships as the very "crucible in which powerful emotions are formed" (p.7). However, despite the obviously critical nature of affective processes in close relationships, such processes are, as yet, only poorly understood. In the clinical and close relationships literature, emotions of love, anger, disappointment and hatred, often experienced within close relationships, have usually been regarded

as concomitants of relationship satisfaction or distress, rather than as phenomena of interest in their own right. Clearly, this restricted view of emotions does not accurately reflect the richness and breadth of an individual couple's affective life.

Berscheid (1983) proposed that the early phases of a close relationship are usually characterised by the experience of intense and diverse emotions as individuals seek (often unsuccessfully) to harmoniously "mesh" their expectations and interactions. Consequently, our first aim in the present study was to investigate the self reported, imagined emotional reactions of subjects involved in steady to serious, nonmarital, romantic relationships, in response to a number of hypothetical, positive and negative relationship behaviours that were either self or partner initiated.

Our first, perhaps self-evident prediction was that positive behaviours would produce more positive emotions than negative behaviours, and vice versa for negative behaviours. Our second prediction was derived from Berscheid's (1983) theoretical analysis of emotion in close relationships. Berscheid proposed that a partner-caused interruption to one's activities, wishes, hopes, plans or expectations should induce one to feel negative emotion; conversely,

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being unexpectedly assisted by one's partner to complete ongoing activities or plans should induce one to feel positive emotion. Since events that are surprising, interruptive, or facilitative are more likely to originate from some external cause (e.g. one's partner) than from one's own behaviour, we predicted that partner-initiated relationship behaviours would elicit more expressions of emotion overall than would self-initiated behaviours.

In order to test these predictions, we had subjects involved in close, nonmarital relationships imagine themselves participating in a series of hypothetical, interactive behaviours, as if these behaviours were really occurring within their own relationship. While imagining each event, subjects gave verbal descriptions of their probable thoughts and emotions (a methodology that has been effectively utilized in previous research to explore emotion knowledge, e.g. Harrison, 1986; Sommers & Scioli, 1986).

Given the scarcity of emotion research within intimate contexts, it was not possible to formulate specific predictions concerning the kinds of emotion labels (e.g. fear, anger, happiness, love, etc.) that various positive and negative, self and partner initiated relationship behaviours would be likely to elicit (see Fitness and Strongman, in press). Thus, a second aim of this study was to develop and provisionally test a taxonomy of the kinds of emotions that might be of particular relevance to people interacting within close relationships. In order to examine the adequacy of the taxonomy, we had subjects follow their open-ended emotional descriptions with a review of the same relationship behaviours, choosing an emotion label that best described their feelings from a supplied list. Later, coders examined subjects' transcripts and attempted to code spontaneously mentioned emotion terms into the same categories. Thus, a preliminary test of the taxonomy was obtained by calculating the reliability with which the emotional descriptions could be coded from the verbal protocols into the emotion categories, and also by the convergent validity between the two measures of emotion elicitation.

In devising a list of emotions that would represent a comprehensive coverage of affective states with as little redundancy as possible, we were guided theoretically by Roseman's (1984) taxonomy of "basic" emotions, comprising five positive emotions (Happiness, Relief, Warmth/

love, Pride and Hope), nine negative emotions (Guilt, Fear, Shame, Disgust, Regret, Dislike/coolness, Sorrow, Anger and Frustration) and an emotion which can be either pleasant or unpleasant, Surprise. Roseman's taxonomy was adopted because his structural model of emotion includes specifically interpersonal emotions (such as dislike/coolness, and warmth/love) as well as more specifically "self" directed emotions (such as guilt and pride). Along with Roseman's 15 emotion labels, we added "contempt" to the list, on the basis of Smith & Ellsworth's (1985) finding that "contempt" was a more commonly used emotion label in the context of interpersonal relationships (for example, in response to broken dates) than "anger", which was associated with a wider range of experiences.

To summarize, the aims of this study were to explore open-ended descriptions of imagined emotional reactions to a series of self and partner initiated, positive and negative relationship behaviours, and to compare these reactions with forced choice responses to the same behaviours from a taxonomy of 16 experimenter-supplied emotion labels. Although the study was, in part, exploratory, we predicted that the positivity of behaviours and elicited emotions would be concordant, and that partner-initiated behaviours would elicit more emotions than self-initiated behaviours.

Method

Subjects

Seventy one undergraduate students (35 men and 36 women) attending the University of Canterbury were recruited for this study. The sample comprised students individually involved in long-term nonmarital relationships. The mean age of the sample was 20.3 years ($SD = 3.7$ years), and the mean time reported dating was 54.5 weeks ($SD = 48.4$ weeks). Subjects were selected if they reported a) not living together, b) seeing their partners more than three times a month, and c) dating for longer than one month. Of the total sample, 2.8% reported the relationship as casual, 29.6% reported steady dating, 62% reported serious dating, and 5.6% reported being engaged.

Procedure and measures

Subjects were individually welcomed to the laboratory by a female researcher and given a list of 20 hypothetical, interactive relationship behaviours. The researcher instructed subjects to proceed through the list, reading each statement aloud into a tape recorder and describing, as fully as possible,

what they would be thinking and feeling about each behaviour if it were actually happening within their own relationship. When subjects had finished the taping task, they reviewed each behaviour and selected from a list of emotion labels the one which best described their probable emotional reaction. Subjects were then thoroughly debriefed and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given.

Hypothetical behaviours

Ten positive and ten negative behaviours that could be readily applied to dating couples were selected from Weiss & Margolin's (1977) list of 408 events or behaviours that commonly occur between spouses in marriage. These behaviours were adapted for dating couples and pretested for their valence by a student sample. Every effort was made to select as representative a sample of behaviours that frequently occur in close relationships as possible (see Appendix One). Each behaviour was phrased in the present tense and printed in two initiation conditions, self and partner (e.g. "I hug and kiss my partner"; "My partner hugs and kisses me"), making a total of 40 behaviours. Each behaviour was printed separately at the top of a sheet of paper and a group of 20 behaviours was collated in random order for each subject. Of the 10 positive behaviours, 5 referred to self and 5 to the partner, and of the 10 negative behaviours, 5 referred to self and 5 to the partner. We controlled the content of the behavioural descriptions by ensuring that half the male and female subjects received the behaviours in the opposite initiation condition to the other half of the subjects.

Forced choice emotion list

Each of the behaviours presented to subjects in the taping task was presented again in the same order, along with the list of 16 emotion labels described in the introduction. Subjects were required to once again imagine the behaviour actually occurring, and to circle the word that best described their imagined emotional reaction. Subjects then completed questionnaires unconnected with this study and were thoroughly debriefed.

Results

Emotion Coding

All taped contents were typed in full and the resulting protocols were coded both by the experimenter and an assistant coder. Each coder independently examined every transcript for emotion words and categorized them according to the same list of 16 emotion labels used in the forced choice emotion task. Coders were supplied with a coding guide, consisting of

groups of related terms for each of the 16 emotion categories, collated from various sources (e.g. Harrison, 1986; Roget's Thesaurus).¹ Any emotion words that could not be readily assigned to one of the 16 categories were coded as "not applicable", and only those emotion words that referred directly to the behaviour in question were coded. Overall interrater reliability for the identification of emotion words from the transcripts was 96.5%. Interrater reliability for the assignment of agreed-upon emotion words into the 16 categories was also high; every category achieved an interrater reliability of at least 89% (with seven categories reaching 100%). Differences in emotion categorization were resolved in discussion. The number of words identified by both coders as "emotional" but unclassifiable with reference to the 16 available categories was very low ($n = 25$, 1% of the total number of emotions mentioned). The percentage of interrater reliability for this "Not applicable" category was 100%; hence, overall, the coding scheme was very reliable.

Open-ended Emotion Descriptions

The mean number of emotion labels elicited in the open-ended task over all subjects was 33.8, with a mean of 6.7 different emotion categories elicited over all the behaviours. While this breadth measure was not significantly correlated with transcript length, ($r = .14$), the correlation between the number of emotions mentioned and transcript length was significant ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), but rather low. Hence it was not considered necessary to analyse and express the results as a ratio measure.²

In order to test our first prediction that positive and negative behaviours would elicit positive and negative emotions respectively, the 15 emotions (omitting surprise) were divided into positive and negative categories, and a 2 (sex) \times 2 (emotion valency) \times 2 (behaviour valency) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second two factors was conducted. Results confirmed that more positive emotions were mentioned in response to positive behaviours ($M = 6.77$) than negative emotions ($M = 0.79$), while more negative emotions were mentioned in response to negative behaviours ($M = 9.02$) than positive emotions ($M = 0.14$), $F(4, 66) = 43.28$, $p < .001$. No other significant main effects or interactions were found.

Prior to further analysis, we summed the emotions mentioned for the five behaviours included within each of the four behaviour valency x behaviour initiator cells, giving four emotion frequency totals per subject. A 2 (sex) x 2 (behaviour valency) x 2 (behaviour initiator) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second two factors revealed that for both positive and negative behaviours, partner-initiated behaviours elicited significantly more emotion mentions ($M = 10.8$) than self-initiated behaviours ($M = 6.07$), $F(1, 67) = 54.4$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Table 1: Mean Number of Spontaneously Mentioned Emotions According to Valency and Initiator of Behaviour

Initiator of Behaviour	Behaviour Valency	
	Positive	Negative
Self	5.5 (5.0)	6.7 (5.3)
Partner	9.8 (7.1)	11.8 (8.9)

Note: Standard deviations are quoted in brackets. The number of emotions is based on five behavioural scenarios in each cell.

While positive emotions were much more commonly mentioned in response to positive

behaviours than were negative emotions, with the opposite pattern occurring for negative behaviours, differences in emotions according to the initiator of a behaviour were not so well defined. The results are shown in Table 2.³

Self-initiated behaviours. Guilt was the most common emotion mentioned in response to a self-initiated, negative behaviour. Anger and Sorrow (typically described as being "angry", "mad" or "annoyed" and "hurt" or "upset" respectively) were also frequently mentioned, while Shame (typically described as "embarrassment") and Regret were elicited less frequently than might have been expected. The overall incidence of positive emotions was very low. For self-initiated, positive behaviours, the overall incidence of negative emotions was very low, although a surprising number of subjects mentioned Fear (typically described as "worried"), and Shame ("embarrassment"). The incidence of Pride was very low; subjects were more likely to mention Happiness and Warmth/love with respect to their own positive behaviours.

Partner-initiated behaviours. Happiness and Warmth/love were most commonly mentioned in response to partner-initiated positive behaviours, and apart from Shame ("embarrassment"), the overall incidence of negative emotions was very low. The most frequently men-

Table 2: Percentage of Subjects Spontaneously Mentioning Emotion Categories

Emotion Category	Self-initiated behaviour		Partner-initiated behaviour	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
	Happiness	70	10	86
Warmth/love	56	4	73	-
Relief	17	-	22.5	-
Pride	8	-	21	-
Hope	3	-	13	-
Anger	3	42	7	87
Guilt	1	77.5	6	6
Sorrow	7	41	3	72
Shame	17	24	18	37
Fear	15.5	25	4	31
Frustration	6	6	1	18
Regret	-	8.5	-	-
Contempt	-	1	1	6
Dislike/coolness	3	4	-	4
Disgust	-	1	-	3
Surprise	1	1	7	7

Note: The percentage frequencies are based on five behavioural scenarios.

tioned emotion in response to partner-initiated negative behaviours was Anger ("angry", "mad" or "annoyed"). However, Sorrow ("hurt" or "upset"), Fear ("worry") and Shame ("embarrassment") mentions were also common. The incidence of Contempt was very low (only 6%); similarly, the incidence of Dislike/coolness and Disgust was minimal.

Forced Choice Emotion Category Results

Of the possible 16 emotion categories, subjects chose a mean number of 8.5 categories (compared with the 6.7 emotion categories mentioned spontaneously). Thus it appears the availability of a list of emotion words facilitated a finer differentiation between various emotion categories than occurred in the open-ended description task. As with the spontaneously mentioned emotion categories, large differences in the frequencies of chosen emotion categories were obtained, depending on behaviour valency and (to a greater extent than for spontaneously mentioned emotions) the initiator of the behaviour. The results are shown in Table 3.

Self-initiated behaviours. Unlike the spontaneously mentioned emotions, the frequency of Pride choices in response to self-initiated positive behaviours was fairly high. However, as with the spontaneous results, the frequency

of Warmth/love and Happiness was very high. For self-initiated negative behaviours, Guilt was most frequently chosen, and the incidence of Shame and Regret increased considerably over the spontaneous results. It is interesting to note that number of Fear choices fell dramatically when compared with the spontaneous Fear ("worry") mentions. Although the incidence of Sorrow was much lower than for the spontaneous condition, the frequency of Frustration was much higher.

Partner-initiated behaviours. For partner-initiated, positive behaviours, Warmth/love and Happiness were the most frequently chosen categories. As with self-initiated, positive behaviours, the incidence of Pride was high, and the incidence of negative emotions was very low. For partner-initiated negative behaviours, the incidence of Dislike was higher than for the spontaneous results; unlike the spontaneous results, however, the incidence of Sorrow was low while Frustration was high. The percentage of subjects choosing Surprise (particularly in response to partner-initiated, negative behaviours) increased markedly over the spontaneous results.

Table 3: *Percentage of Subjects Choosing Emotion Categories*

Emotion Category	Self-initiated behaviour		Partner-initiated behaviour	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Happiness	68	10	87	4
Warmth/love	97	10	94	4
Relief	13	3	17	-
Pride	45	-	46.5	1
Hope	10	-	8	1
Anger	-	6	-	62
Guilt	4	82	3	-
Sorrow	-	17	-	30
Shame	-	49	3	18
Fear	1	6	-	7
Frustration	7	30	4	70
Regret	-	49	3	18
Contempt	4	11	1	13
Dislike/coolness	1	15.5	3	30
Disgust	-	18	-	18
Surprise	7	10	17	44

Note: The percentage frequencies are based on five behavioural scenarios.

The Relation Between Forced Choice Emotions and Spontaneously Mentioned Emotions

A Spearman's Rank order correlation was calculated to determine the consistency between the percentage frequency of mention for the 16 spontaneously mentioned emotion categories (Table 2) and the percentage frequency of selection for the forced choice emotion categories (Table 3). The overall consistency between these two measures was positive and significant for self-positive behaviours ($r = .58, p < .05$), for self-negative behaviours ($r = .49, p < .05$), for partner-positive behaviours ($r = .70, p < .01$) and for partner-negative behaviours ($r = .57, p < .05$). These results suggest that subjects' initial, open-ended, emotional descriptions were in general accord with their later emotion label choices. However, "Shame", "Regret", "Frustration" and "Surprise" were more heavily represented in the forced choice than in the open-ended condition, while "Anger", "Sorrow" and "Fear" were more heavily represented in the open-ended than the forced choice condition.

Discussion

The first aim of this study was to explore imagined emotional reactions to hypothetical, interactional close relationship behaviors. First, as predicted, positive and negative relationship behaviours elicited mainly positive and negative emotions, respectively. Second, partner-initiated behaviors elicited a good deal more emotion mentions than did self-initiated behaviours. This latter finding is in line with Berscheid's (1983) "interruption" and "completion" hypotheses, and confirms that one's partner is a potent source of positive and negative emotion for the self.

With respect to the kinds of emotion labels elicited by different kinds of behaviours, we found that in the open-ended task subjects spoke naturally of their anger, annoyance, happiness and hurt, their embarrassment and worry, and their love for their partners. These terms appear to comprise our sample's "folk" taxonomy of emotions in close relationships. Given the high reliability of our coding system, it is clear that such a taxonomy may be readily translated into a more theoretically derived taxonomy. However, subjects' spontaneous emotion descriptions converged less exactly with the emotion categories subjects themselves

later chose. Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson and O'Connor (1987) note that "basic" emotion terms often have short, single word names, and are accessed most rapidly when a relevant stimulus is encountered; these terms are predominantly used by people in everyday conversation. It appears that in the open-ended descriptive task our subjects found words like "embarrassment", "worry", "hurt" and "upset" better captured the affective "flavour" of negative relationship behaviours than did the labels we supplied of Shame, Fear and Sorrow. Consequently, it may be the case that such words represent the most relevant "basic" emotions within this specifically interpersonal context. On the other hand, in the forced choice task subjects were able to distinguish between such emotion labels as Happiness and Pride, Anger and Frustration, Guilt and Regret, reflecting perhaps a more considered application of abstract emotion knowledge. Clearly, this issue needs further research in light of its theoretical and methodological implications; for example, concerning which emotions (if any) are truly "basic" or primary, and also in choosing a methodology for examining emotion knowledge and labelling.

It should also be noted that some emotions appeared rather infrequently in both tasks (e.g. Hope, Contempt and Disgust), while Dislike/coolness was much more frequently chosen from the forced choice task than mentioned spontaneously. In her cross cultural study of emotion evaluations, Sommers (1984) found the majority of subjects considered negative feelings such as "hatred" to be dangerous and destructive. Certainly, in the present study, such feelings were not spontaneously mentioned. However, it is possible that the forced choice category of "Dislike/coolness" may have been perceived as a relatively "safe" and moderate way to describe such negative feelings about a partner. On reflection, it would have been useful to have strengthened the "Dislike/coolness" category to "Hatred", to see if subjects would have felt more comfortable about choosing such a "socially undesirable" emotion than spontaneously mentioning it. Similarly, given that there were seven spontaneous mentions of "jealousy", it would have been interesting to see how much more frequently this very unpopular emotion (Sommers, 1984) would have been chosen, had it been available.

In summary, the results of both the open-ended and forced choice tasks suggest that the following taxonomy of emotion labels may be of particular relevance to subjects interacting in close relationship settings: Love, Happiness, Anger, Guilt, Hurt, Frustration, Embarrassment, Regret, Surprise, Pride, Worry, Relief, (and, more tentatively, Hatred and Jealousy). It remains for future research to investigate when, why and how such emotions are elicited within intimate settings, and how the antecedents, appraisals and experience of such states as "worry" and "embarrassment", for example, differ from the experience of "fear" or "shame" within an interpersonal context.

There are, of course, obvious limitations to this study. In particular, caution needs to be exercised in generalising the results obtained by a methodology based on imagining hypothetical behaviours, to the expression of emotions in real life relationship settings. Nevertheless, we believe the methodology used here is a useful technique for the investigation of emotion labelling schemata. Hence, the results obtained provide a helpful beginning to what will we hope, in time, become a much more finely detailed account of emotion within the specifically interpersonal context of close relationships.

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¹ A copy of the coding guide is available from the first author.

² Statistical tests reported in this section were also carried out on the emotion frequency results expressed as a ratio measure (emotion frequency divided by transcript length). The results obtained were very similar to the results reported.

³ Given that there are no appropriate statistical analyses that can compare within-subject nominal data of this type, the percentage frequency data for both the open-ended and forced choice conditions are simply displayed and described.

Appendix One

Behaviour list

Positive behaviours

- 1) I hug and kiss my partner
- 2) I agree strongly with something my partner says
- 3) I compliment my partner on his/her appearance
- 4) I confide in my partner
- 5) I call my partner just to say hello
- 6) I talk affectionately to my partner
- 7) I tell my partner I admire his/her body
- 8) I listen sympathetically to my partner's problems
- 9) I take my partner out for a nice meal
- 10) I make a good impression on my partner's friends

Negative behaviours

- 1) I am unpleasant to my partner's friends
 - 2) I exclude my partner from an activity in which s/he would like to participate
 - 3) I open my partner's mail or go through his/her personal papers
 - 4) I embarrass my partner in front of friends or relatives
 - 5) I refuse to listen to my partner's feelings
 - 6) I criticize my partner in front of others
 - 7) I am sarcastic with my partner
 - 8) I make us both late for an appointment by not being ready on time
 - 9) I bother my partner when s/he is concentrating
 - 10) I fail to turn up for a prearranged date with my partner
- (Each of these behaviours was also printed with the partner as initiator, making 40 behaviours in total.)