



# Negative Emotions In Young Women's Narratives About Romantic Relationship Problems

Trista Chiu, Izabela Milaniak, Alexander Yasneski, Jessica Fredericks, and Candice Feiring, Ph.D.

The College of New Jersey



*This study examined young women's negative emotions used in narratives about conflicts with their current romantic partners. Sixty women were interviewed about when their partners did not meet their needs and completed ratings of relationship conflict strategies and insecure attachment. While negative emotions were reliably coded, they were not related to self-report of conflict strategies and insecure styles.*

## Introduction

- As intimacy and support increase within adolescent romantic relationships, conflicts become increasingly common
- Negative emotions are important for understanding the use of conflict strategies in romantic relationships
- Little is known about representations of negative emotions in the context of narratives about romantic conflicts

## Purpose

This study examined:

- The extent to which anger, sadness and other negative emotions characterized young women's narratives about conflict with their partners over unmet needs
- The relations between negative emotions and conflict resolution strategies
- The relations between negative emotions and insecure attachment styles

## Method

### Sample:

- 60 female participants (mean age = 19.36 years;  $SD= 1.11$ )
- 76.7% Caucasian, 100% heterosexual
- Mean relationship length of 19.34 months ( $SD= 15.75$ , ranged from 3-60 months)

### Semi-structured interview

- Main prompt-** Can you give me an example of a time when your partner did not meet your needs?

### Follow up prompts

- (1) Can you walk me through what happened?, (2) How did you feel?, (3) Did you have any other reactions?, and (4) How did your partner feel?
- Script repeated (2 examples of unmet needs)
- Interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim

### Conflict Strategies (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994)

- Problem Solving, Conflict Engagement, Compliance and Withdrawal
- 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Never" to 5 = "Always")

### Insecure Attachment Styles (BSQ-RP; Furman & Wehner, 1994)

- Anxious and Avoidant attachment styles with romantic partner
- Only the insecure attachment scales were included in this study because survey measures do not reliably assess security
- 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree")

## Negative Emotion: Narrative Coding

### Negative Emotion Categories

- 3 categories of emotion words
  - Anger** – (hard emotions) emotions associated with asserting power and control
    - Pissed off, mad, annoyed
  - Sad** – (soft emotions) emotions associated with vulnerability
    - Hurt, disappointed, distraught
  - General Negative** – negative emotions that do not fit into the anger or sad category
    - Upset, bothered, confused
- Coded only emotion words used to describe the speaker's feelings not those of her partner
- Number of words in each category were summed to create three total scores

### Example 1:

"I was really **confused** as to why it didn't seem like he was supporting me and then um I got a little **mad** and I was **upset** um but then he explained to me that he was giving me tough love because he wants me to be prepared for difficult situations... But um yeah so I was just kind of **confused** and **upset**."

### Example 2:

"Um yea it was again just really **hurtful** cause like Valentine's day and everything and so like obviously I felt **sad** um ... prob yea probably **annoyed** too that he would actually do that and have the nerve to do that but yea just very **dejected** and **rejected**."

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Negative Emotions, Conflict Strategies, and Insecure Attachment Styles*

	Mean	SD	Range
Negative Emotions:			
Anger <sup>a</sup>	3.73	2.92	0.00 – 11.00
Sad <sup>b</sup>	1.85	2.16	0.00 – 10.00
General Negative <sup>a</sup>	4.15	3.29	0.00 – 13.00
Conflict Strategies:			
Problem Solving <sup>a</sup>	4.06	0.51	3.00 – 5.00
Conflict Engagement <sup>c</sup>	2.13	0.73	1.25 – 4.00
Withdrawal <sup>b</sup>	2.37	0.86	1.00 – 4.50
Compliance <sup>c</sup>	2.06	0.75	1.00 – 4.75
Attachment Styles:			
Anxious <sup>a</sup>	2.16	0.92	1.00 – 4.40
Avoidant <sup>b</sup>	1.81	0.62	1.00 – 3.40

NOTE: Variables that share different superscripts are significantly different using paired t-test for at least  $p < .05$

**Table 2**

*Correlations of Negative Emotions with Conflict Strategies and Insecure Attachment Styles*

	Anger	Sadness	General Negative
Conflict Strategies:			
Problem Solving	.06	-.05	-.22 <sup>†</sup>
Conflict Engagement	-.02	-.01	.24 <sup>†</sup>
Withdrawal	.02	.09	.14
Compliance	-.11	-.22 <sup>†</sup>	-.07
Attachment Styles:			
Anxious	-.11	.16	-.03
Avoidant	.08	-.01	-.18

<sup>†</sup> =  $p < .10$

## Results

### Inter-rater Reliability between two Coders for Negative Emotion Words:

Coding for 15 Narratives: Excellent

- Anger:  $r = .98$ , 95% absolute agreement
- Sad:  $r = .96$ , 86% absolute agreement
- Gen Neg:  $r = .98$ , 90% absolute agreement

### Descriptive Information (see Table 1; paired t-test and correlation analyses):

#### Negative Emotion

- Anger and General Negative emotions were expressed significantly more than Sad emotions
- More Anger was related to more Sadness ( $r = .28, p < .05$ )

#### Conflict Strategies

- Positive Problem Solving was endorsed more than all the negative conflict strategies
- Withdrawal was endorsed more than Conflict Engagement and Compliance
- More Problem Solving was associated with less Conflict Engagement ( $r = -.47, p < .0001$ ) and withdrawal ( $r = -.31, p < .0001$ ).
- More Conflict Engagement was related to more Withdrawal ( $r = .30, p < .05$ )
- More Withdrawal was related to more Compliance ( $r = .34, p < .01$ )

#### Insecure Attachment Styles

- The Anxious style was endorsed more than Avoidant style
- The Anxious and Avoidant styles were not related

#### Negative Emotions and Conflict Strategies (see top of Table 2)

- Unexpectedly Anger was not related to conflict strategies
- More Sadness showed a trend to be related to less Compliance
- More General Negative emotions showed a trend to be related to less Problem Solving and more Conflict Engagement

#### Negative Emotions and Insecure Attachment Styles (see bottom half of Table 2)

- Insecure attachment styles were not related to negative emotions

## Conclusion

- Negative emotions can be reliably coded
- Narratives vividly capture the negative emotions expressed by women during descriptions of their unmet romantic relationship needs
- Narratives tap into meaning making processes that are different from self-reported conflict strategies and insecure attachment styles

### Acknowledgement:

The undergraduate students in the Romantic Relationships Research Laboratory. [www.tcnj.edu/~cyrd/research.htm](http://www.tcnj.edu/~cyrd/research.htm)