

This study examined differences in young women and men’s relationship narratives about times when their partners did not meet their needs and their expressions of negative emotion. Forty-two participants (50% men) were interviewed about times their partners did not meet their needs. Women were more likely than men to discuss unmet intimacy needs, whereas men were more likely than women to discuss unmet sexual needs. Women expressed more general negative emotions about unmet needs than men.

Introduction

- How individuals handle conflict is key for understanding romantic relationship functioning
- Unmet needs and negative emotions in romantic relationships are related to more conflict and poorer relationship quality
- Little is known about how women and men represent unmet needs and negative emotions during narratives about specific romantic relationships
- Theory suggests:
 - a. Women more than men will focus on unmet intimacy, nurturance and security needs and express more general negative and sad emotions
 - b. Men more than women will focus on unmet sexual needs and express more angry emotions

Purpose

1. Investigate gender differences in narrative representations of unmet intimacy, nurturance, security, sexual, enhancement of worth, and companionship needs in romantic relationships
2. Examine gender differences in representations in the expression of angry, sad, and general negative emotions during narratives about unmet needs in romantic relationships

Method

Sample

- 42 participants (21 men)
- Mean age = 19.29 years ($SD= 1.09$)
- Relationship length $M=17.38$ mo. ($SD= 14.74$, range from 3-60)
- 74% Caucasian

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 (attained 2 examples of unmet needs)
- Interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim

Unmet Need Types in Narratives

- Intimacy, Nurturance, Security, Sexual, Enhancement of Worth, and Companionship

Emotions in Narratives

- Angry, Sad, and General Negative

Narrative Coding

Coding Unmet Need Types

- Narratives were coded for the presence or the absence of each unmet need type (see Table 1)
- Inter-rater reliability between two coders was excellent and ranged from Kappa .65 – 1.0

Table 1

| Unmet Need Type | Definition |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Intimacy | Self disclosure of thoughts and feelings |
| Nurturance | Attending to physical or psychological care |
| Security | Assurance of stability and longevity of the relationship |
| Sexual | Physical touching of an intimate nature |
| Enhancement of Worth | Acceptance and validation of one’s unique self and values |
| Companionship | Making time for one another, sharing experiences |

Example 1: Unmet Intimacy Need

“It made me feel like um like I was left alone and like, yes we are in a relationship but he still has a lot of work to do. I mean I told him that he was sort of like that only, only person outside like my family or best friends who I would actually talk and my family, like my sister who’s basically the same age as I am, she’s in school too. My best friends are in school. So it’s like he he he’s in school but he’s a part-time student at a community college so he sort of kind of has more time they would to you know listen to how I feel and also, not so much the fact the you’re my boyfriend, like if I can’t talk to my sister about it and I can’t talk to my best friend about it, then you’re next on the list. And um I guess that it made me feel like like he wasn’t fulfilling the role that he was supposed to.”

Example 2: Unmet Sexual Need

“...I guess I knew that it had to change with time she had to like trust me stuff like having sex is a big deal for her or for anyone really so that that kinda thing um yeah so initially it was kinda frustrating cause she didn’t really meet my needs because I had more expectation because I’ve done more things and you know I feel like progress faster than she does and she takes things very slowly...”

Coding Negative Emotions

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 well it was kinda like I never get angry but I got like a little **bitter** and like kinda **jealous** of her work and I think like I want to do well but I wanted to see her so it’s kinda **disappointing** for me.”

Results

Table 2

Frequency of Types of Unmet Needs Present in Relationship Narratives by Gender

| | Women % (N) | Men % (N) | Total % (N) |
|------------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| Intimacy ^a | 43 (9) | 14 (3) | 29 (12) |
| Nurturance | 33 (7) | 14 (3) | 24 (10) |
| Security | 29 (6) | 33 (7) | 31 (13) |
| Sexual ^b | 0 (0) | 24 (5) | 12 (5) |
| Enhance Worth | 10 (2) | 0 (0) | 5 (2) |
| Companionship | 67(14) | 86 (18) | 76 (32) |

^a $\chi^2(1, N = 42) = 4.20, p < .05$, ^b $\chi^2(1, N = 42) = 5.68, p < .05$

Table 3

Means for Negative Emotions Used in Romantic Relationship Narratives about Unmet Needs by Gender

| | Women <i>M (SD)</i> | Men <i>M (SD)</i> | Total <i>M (SD)</i> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Angry | 3.24 (2.84) | 2.48 (2.89) | 2.86 (2.86) |
| Sad | 1.05 (1.20) | 2.00 (2.12) | 1.52 (1.77) |
| Gen Neg ^a | 4.48 (2.71) | 1.76 (2.00) | 3.12 (2.73) |

^a Pillai’s Trace (42) = 8.04, $p = .0001$, $F(3, 42) = 13.63, p = .001$

Conclusions

- Consistent with social structural theory, women were more likely than men to discuss unmet intimacy needs
- Consistent with prior research, women were more likely than men to express general negative emotions when their partners did not meet their needs
- Consistent with sexual strategies theory, men were more likely than women to discuss unmet sexual needs
- Future research will examine the extent to which gender moderates the relation between type of unmet need and negative emotion expressed

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