

Study explores how partners perceive each other's emotion during a relationship fight

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Some of the most intense emotions people feel occur during a conflict in a romantic relationship. Now, new research from Baylor University psychologists shows that how each person perceives the other partner's emotion during a conflict greatly influences different types of thoughts, feelings and reactions in themselves.

Dr. Keith Sanford, a clinical psychologist and an associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor, College of Arts and Sciences, and his research team studied 105 college students in [romantic relationships](#) as they communicated through different arguments over an eight-week period. Sanford focused on how emotion changed within each person across episodes of relationship conflict. They found demonstrated links between different types of emotion, different types of underlying concern, and different types of perceived partner emotion.

Sanford distinguished between two types of negative emotion as "hard" and "soft." "Hard" emotion is associated with asserting power, whereas "soft" emotion is associated with expressing vulnerability. Sanford's research also identified a type of underlying concern as "perceived threat," which involves a perception that one's partner is being hostile, critical, blaming or controlling. Another type of concern is called "perceived neglect," which involves a perception that one's partner is failing to make a desired contribution or failing to demonstrate an ideal level of commitment or investment in the relationship.

Sanford said the results show that people perceive a threat to their

control, power and status in the relationship when they observe an increase in partner hard emotion and they perceive partner neglect when they observe an increase in partner flat emotion or a decrease in partner soft emotion. Both perceived threat and perceived neglect, in turn, are associated with increases in one's own hard and soft emotions, with the effects for perceived neglect being stronger than the effects for perceived threat.

"In other words, what you perceive your partner to be feeling influences different types of thoughts, feelings and reactions in yourself, whether what you perceive is actually correct," Sanford said. "In a lot of ways, this study confirms scientifically what we would have expected. Previously, we did not actually know that these specific linkages existed, but they are clearly theoretically expected. If a person perceives the other as angry, they will perceive a threat so they will respond with a hard emotion like anger or blame. Likewise, if a person is perceived to be sad or vulnerable, they will perceive a [neglect](#) and will respond either flat or soft."

More information: The study appeared in the journal *Personal Relationships*.

Provided by Baylor University

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