

How men and women cooperate

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(Medical Xpress)—While men tend to match their partners' emotions during mutual cooperation, women may have the opposite response, according to new research.

Cooperation is essential in any successful [romantic relationship](#), but how [men and women](#) experience cooperation emotionally may be quite different, according to new research conducted at the University of Arizona.

Ashley Randall, a post-doctoral research associate in the UA's John & Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences and the UA's department of psychiatry, has been interested for some time in how romantic partners' emotions become coordinated with one another. For example, if someone comes home from work in a bad mood we know their partner's mood might plummet as well, but what are the long-term implications of this on their relationship?

Randall wondered how the act of cooperating, a beneficial relationship process, might impact emotional coordination between partners.

"Cooperation – having the ability to work things out with your partner, while achieving mutually beneficial outcomes – is so important in relationships, and I wondered what kind of emotional connectivity comes from cooperating with your partner?" she said.

What she found in her recent study – published in SAGE's *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* and featured in the journal's podcast series, [Relationship Matters](#) – were surprising gender differences.

She and her colleagues found that during high mutual levels of cooperation with a romantic partner, men typically experience an "inphase" response to their significant other's emotions. That is, if the woman in the relationship is feeling more positive, the man will feel more positive. If she feels less positive, he will feel less positive.

On the contrary, it seems women experience more of an "antiphase" pattern during high mutual cooperation. If her partner is feeling more positive, she will tend to feel less positive, and vice versa.

Take, for example, the following familiar scenario: A woman emerges from a department store fitting room and asks her husband what he thinks of a potential new shirt. He likes it, he says, hoping his time at the

mall is nearing an end. So does the woman head straight to the cash register and make the purchase? Probably not. Chances are, her husband's enthusiasm won't be enough; she'll want to try on a few more shirts first.

Social psychology literature on cooperation tells us that women generally tend to cooperate more, while men often try to avoid conflict. Thus, men might be subconsciously syncing their emotions with their partners' during cooperation in an effort to avoid conflict or reach a speedy resolution, Randall says.

If that's the case, it's possible, although Randall's study didn't test for it, that women may pick up on the fact that their partner's agreeability is not entirely authentic. If she suspects he's not really as positive as he seems, or that he has an ulterior motive, she may become less positive herself in an attempt to get at his real feelings and reach a more mutually satisfying resolution, Randall suggests.

"If you think about a couple that is trying to cooperate with one another, the man might go along and say, 'oh sure, honey, this is great, are we almost done?' whereas the women might say, 'I'm so glad that you're happy, but I just want to talk about this one other thing because I think we're really getting at a resolution,'" Randall said.

In the end, Randall's results suggest that women may tend to serve as the emotional regulators during cooperation.

Randall based her findings on an analysis of 44 heterosexual couples who were videotaped having a conversation about their shared lifestyle related to diet and health. The couples were asked to watch the video back and, using a rating dial, provide momentary feedback about how they were feeling emotionally. Researchers analyzed the videos as well as the participants' responses to them.

Co-authored by the UA's Jesi Post, Rebecca Reed and Emily Butler, the study has implications for better understanding how romantic partners' emotions are connected.

"Cooperation is something that's invaluable and instrumental in a successful relationship but men and women experience it differently," Randall said. "This research provides another avenue to understanding how partners' emotions can become linked, but future research is needed on how these [emotional](#) patterns may ultimately contribute to the longevity, or demise, of the romantic relationship."

Provided by University of Arizona

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