Positive and negative emotions among young Romanian couples-what, how and why to express them

Simona Herb, Maria Nicoleta Turluc, Roxana Dumitru*

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iasi, 700554, Romania

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the positive and negative emotions of young Romanian couples in terms of what do they usually express, how they consider is adequate to express them and what are the reasons for which they consider expressing them. 98 participants (57 women and 45 men; age M=26.4, minimum 20, maximum 45 years old) responded, more than 350 words/ expression were analyzed for each of the considered topics. Results show that the Romanian specific cultural heritage prevails – young Romania couples face difficulties in recognizing and expressing their emotions, even though they are aware of the related benefits. Gender differences still need to be furthered explored, but confirm the enforced alexithymia mainly upon men.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of PSIWORLD 2014.
Keywords: primary emotions, emotional connectivity, emotional skillfulness

1. Introduction

Emotion, as the psychological process that offers us directions in this world and prepares us to act, remains a debatable concept as throughout time different non- psychological approaches have influenced the specific views, altering the core of the concept. One important issue still strongly debated is related to whether we can establish or not a fixed set of emotions that can be called basic, primary or fundamental, no matter the culture or the historical period.

For several theorists of emotions, the idea that there exists a definite set of basic emotions is central to the approach (Ekman, 1999; Izard, 1977; Oateley & Johnson-Laird, 1987; Plutchik, 1980; Tomkins, 1984). Although the

* Simona Herb. Tel.: +0-475-569-0033.
E-mail address: simona.herb@yahoo.com
concept of basic emotion seems to be similar used, there is still little agreement about the number of such emotions, the exact ones and the reasons for which they can be included in the list or not. Ortony and Turner (1990) review 14 theoretical standpoints and show that the list varies from 3 basic emotions up to 11 emotions, depending mostly on the affiliation to one or another of the most prevalent explanatory trends in the field: evolutionary, neurophysiologic, cognitive.

For the purpose of the current study, we chose to refer to the classification proposed by Parrot (2001) that seems to properly superpose all the above mentioned theories and extracts a final list of six basic emotions, namely love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness and fear, which he then associates with secondary emotions and tertiary emotions, the third level capturing different labels also culturally sensitive (e.g. love as a primary emotion includes affections as a secondary emotions which in its turn can be represented as adoration, affection, love, fondness, liking, attraction, caring, tenderness, compassion, sentimentality).

Is this list of basic emotion cross-cultural? Although literature does cover the aspects of cultural differences, Mesquita and Walker (2003) build a strong case showing that results should be carefully interpreted as most articles assess the potential for emotions meaning the emotional responses that people are capable of having in principle, while the real differences appear at the level of emotional practice, the actual emotions that people experience and express. Mesquita and Walker (2003) show that cultural differences derive from four aspects of emotions: antecedent events (cultures tend to promote certain events associated with particular emotions that are then interpreted as more desirable than others), subjective feeling (the personal agency is significantly different represented by various cultures, an important differences being imposed as such between the American culture that promotes independency and any Asian culture that does not promote it), appraisal, and expression/behavior (happiness that we would have expected to be easier to compare is in fact very differently expressed in Asian cultural compared to western cultures).

As a consequence, an important issue still to be properly studied regards the emotional practice, the emotional expression people chose to adopt in everyday life. The issue is of paramount importance when it comes to couple and family relations as solid relations are built upon strong affective connections. Johnson (1994, 2008) introduced the concept of emotional connectivity to express the fundamental condition upon that safe relationships are built. There are 3 distinct components that create the emotional connectivity – the accessibility (can the partner be reached when needed), the responsiveness (will the partner come if needed) and the engagement in the relationship (will the partner be emotionally present). Therefore building a strong emotional connection requires partners to acknowledge and communicate their emotional states, being aware of the restrictions culture may have installed.

Cordova, Gee, Warren (2005) discuss about an emotional skillfulness within the marital context described as the ability of the partners to identify and express their emotions. The authors show that this skill improves intimacy through several mechanisms: a. emotional identification develops partner’s ability to efficiently reinforce vulnerable behaviors by increasing empathy and the capacity of seizing social clues; b. the ability to identify emotions offers the partners the possibility to better acknowledge and express emotional wounds that happen within the relationship; c. better identification of emotions fosters skillful expression that in turn facilitates intimacy (Cordova, Gee, Warren, 2005, p. 10).

This concept of emotional skillfulness deserves to be better understood as realities show an increased prevalence of alexithymia – the incapacity to verbally express emotions, mainly as a consequence of an improper education ever since childhood. Ever since Levant (1992) proposed the “NormativeMale Alexithymia” (NMA) hypothesis finding so a term for a socialized pattern of restrictive emotionality influenced by traditional masculinity ideology that he observed in men, gender studies focused on the aspect and repeatedly showed that men remain less emotional skillful (Levant et al., 2009) which in turn has important consequence upon couple well being.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this study, 98 participants (57 women and 45 men; age M=26.4, minimum 20, maximum 45 years old) responded; each of them was involved in a romantic relationship of at least 6 months, whether married or just dating. Most of the participants were unmarried, but with a rather long-term relationship (relationship lengths M=65.3 months) and leaving together for quite a while (length of cohabitation, M = 32.6 months).
2.2. Measures

The questionnaire was mainly based on open questions, divided into two separate sections, one for the positive emotional experience within the context of a romantic relationship (including emotions, adequate ways of expressing emotions and reasons to express these emotions), and a similar one for the negative emotional experience. In order to separately assess relative importance, after the questions eliciting the emotions, participants were asked to go over the list and to decide a order of their importance.

2.3. Procedure

Questionnaires assessing positive and negative emotional experiences within couple relationships were administered as soon as eligible participants were identified. Questionnaires were anonymous and were sent back by post. Elicited words were categorized separately by two evaluators; emotions were allocated to categories by reference to the primary emotions as classified by Parrot (2001), while for emotional expressions and reasons to express emotions, categories were generated by each evaluator with reference to emotional connection components. MAXQDA11 was employed to facilitate the categorization, to compute co-occurrences and generate visual conceptual maps.

3. Results

3.1. Positive and negative emotions

Positive emotions as identified by the young Romanians cover only two of the total three categories of primary emotions as classified by Parrot (2001), namely love and joy; the missing category of emotions is surprise, an emotions apparently harder to acknowledge. Out of a total of 478 elicited words/expressions, 371 words/expressions were included in the analysis; the most frequent subcategories are presented in Table 1.

Negative emotions are overall less identified – 301 words/expressions were retained for the analysis, but they are distributed among all three main primary emotions as described by Parrot (2001), namely sadness, anger and fear; as it can be seen in Table 2, anger is quite well represented which is quite uncommon in terms of primary emotions, but going over the secondary and tertiary emotions listed above, one can sense the fury as a consequence of the sadness or fear.

| Primary emotions-positive | Secondary emotions | Tertiary emotions |
|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Joy (T = 186)             | Cheerfulness       | Gladness (T=30)  |
|                           |                    | Happiness (T=41) |
|                           | Pride              | Respect (T=10)   |
| Love (T = 178)            | Affection          | Attraction (T=31)|
|                           |                    | Love (T=40)      |

| Primary emotions-negative | Secondary emotions | Tertiary emotions |
|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Fear (T=47)               | Nervousness        | Worry (T=17)     |
| Anger (T=100)             | Exasperation       | Frustration (T=20)|
|                           | Rage               | Fury (T=31)      |
|                           | Envy               | Jealousy (T=27)  |
| Sadness (T=154)           | Sadness            | Sorrow (T=25)    |
|                           |                    | Unhappiness (T=26)|

A further step of analysis implied computing the relative frequency and importance as assigned by participants; high frequency words were established by reference to the total words considered for the analysis, while the relative importance was computed depending on the importance assigned by the person, from 1 most important to 5 the least important. As a consequence conceptual maps have been generated for each of the primary emotions as defined by Parrot (2001) revealing which of the tertiary emotions are at the core of each emotion; as such, love as a central primary emotion is represented within the young Romanian couple as being composed of love, attraction, admiration, trust and passion, while the central emotions in the representation of sadness compromise sorrow and mistrust.
3.2. Adequate emotional expression

Next categories were generated analyzing the responses regarded the approaches usually employed by the young adults in order to express a specific emotional state,” to let the other know” what and when they feel. Inter-evaluators consensus was harder to reach in this case as several expressions could be misleading, but in the end table 3 and 4 illustrate the main categories and several of the most frequent words/expressions as they were included in the responses.

| Table 3. Positive emotions - how to adequately express them | Table 4. Negative emotions - how to adequately express them |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Overall category** | **Subcategories** | **Expressions/words** | **Overall category** | **Subcategories** |
| Specific behavior | Touching | Hugging | Shouting |
|                 |           | Kissing | Verbal communication |
|                 | Helping the partner | Support, help | As such |
| Non-verbal communication | Smile | - | Avoidance |
|                 | Eye contact | - | - |
| Verbal communication | Verbal expressions | As such | No more communication |
|                 | I love you! | - | - |

3.3. Reasons to express emotions

Last, but not least, reasons for expressing positive emotions were categorized by reference to the basic affective needs that define connectivity, and without special reference for expressing negative emotions.

| Table 5. Positive emotions - why to express them | Table 6. Negative emotions - why to express them |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| **Overall category** | **Subcategories** | **Overall category** | **Subcategories** |
| Expressing accessibility | Because the partner knows he is loved! | Making the other conscious about |
|                          | Partner centered | Constructive reasons |
| Expressing relationship engagement | Relationship enhancement | Getting to know each other |
| Expressing responsiveness | Couple communication | Constructive |
|                          | Self-centering | Repairing mistakes |
|                          | I feel well sharing! | Cathartic |
|                          | | Avoiding negative consequences |
|                          | | Avoiding frustration |
|                          | | Avoiding repetition |
4. Discussion

The investigation has fulfilled the purpose and even exceeded it. The emotion vocabulary, both for the positive and negative experiences, is highly available for the young Romanian adults when referring to their couple interactions. The great majority of respondents are able to name five positive emotions which they usually prioritize differently than the spontaneous order they were filled in. When it comes to negative emotions difficulties are more often encountered (especially by men), less words are listed but in the end all major types of primary emotions are present.

The collectivist heritage tends to hold still an important mark, but nevertheless what we can see it is that beyond cultural prescriptions, beyond a discourse “this is how is nice, this is how is done”, Romanian young and adults express the same fundamental needs – the need to be emotionally connected to someone as special as the romantic partner, to express positive, intense emotions such as love, understanding, respect because this is how they tell their partners that they matter for them. As well, they express negative emotions in order to let the partner what is not worthy for them, to avoid misunderstandings and to show the other how to behave in order to meet the basic needs. It is thus safe to say that Romanians do talk the language of “emotional connectivity” but there is room for improvements which can be properly fostered in a secure context such as the psychotherapy one or support groups for emotional education.

Results need to be furthered explored tackling some of the vulnerabilities of the current study – more men must be encouraged to participate to such studies, also different age cohorts should be considered. Also the word analysis might be done with reference to other theoretical key standpoints in order to see if other aspects arise. As a practical implication, educational programs can be more properly delineated including the emotions that are harder to express allowing couples to develop their emotional skillfulness which in turn would repair their emotional connection.

References

Cordova, J., Gee, C., & Warren, L. (2005). Emotional Skillfulness in Marriage: Intimacy As a Mediator of the Relationship Between Emotional Skillfulness and Marital Satisfaction, Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 24(2), 218-235.

Ekman, P. (1999). Basic emotions. In T., Dalgleish, & M., Power (eds.), Handbook of cognition and emotion. Sussex, UK: JohnWiley and Sons, Ltd.

Izard, C.E. (1977) Human emotions. New York: Plenum Press.

Johnson, S. M. (2004). The Practice of Emotionally Focused Therapy, second edition. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Johnson, S. M., & Greenberg, L. S., (1994). The heart of the matter: Perspectives on emotion in marital therapy. New York: Brunner-Mazel.

Levant, R F.; Hall, R J.; Williams, C. M., & Hasan, N. T. ( 2009). Gender Differences in Alexithymia, Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 10(3), 190-203.

Mesquita,B., Walker, R. (2003), Cultural differences in emotions: a context for interpreting emotional experiences, Behaviour Research and Therapy, 41, 777-793.

Oatley, K. & Johnson-Laird, P. N., (1987). Towards a cognitive theory of emotions. Cognition and Emotion, 1, 29.50.

Orthony, A., & Turner, T., (1990). What is basic about basic emotions? Psychological Review, 97(3), 315-331

Parrot, W. (2001). Emotions in Social Psychology. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

Plutchik, R. (1980). A general psychoevolutionary theory of emotion. In R., Plutchik, & H., Kellerman (eds.), Emotion: theory, research, and experiences, Vol. 1: Theories of emotion. (pp. 3-33). Academic.

Tomkins, & Silvan S., (1980). Affect as amplification: Some modifications in theory. In R., Plutchik, & H., Kellerman (eds.), Emotion: theory, research, and experiences, Vol. 1: Theories of emotion, ( pp. 141.164). New York: Academic Press.