

The Role of Emotional Awareness in Couple Relationships

by Mary Beirne

Introduction

One of our important primary needs is for emotional contact and relationship with others. For adults, exclusive intimate couple relationships provide the potential for the reciprocal expression of feelings and emotions. The key issue for couples seems to be the ability to maintain a context for intimacy and engagement, allowing both partners “experience a sense of trust and security in which they can be safely vulnerable” (Ginsberg, 2004, p 68). Developing and maintaining emotional intimacy depends on each partner’s ability to communicate their feelings to each other. The emotions of both partners can affect not only their own actions but also how their partner responds. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). This article outlines a research study carried out at Dublin City University (DCU) as part of a Masters taught degree programme. The study investigated how partner levels of emotional awareness affect the quality of adult, heterosexual, couple relationships.

Emotional awareness is defined as the ability to recognise emotions in ones-self and in others, including recognising that emotion is present and also cognitive reflection on what is being experienced (Lane & Garfield, 1990). This ability develops from early childhood, mainly through parental emotional expressivity, responses to the child’s emotions, and emotion talk (Warren and Stifter, 2008). Relationship quality as defined by Busby et al (1995) encompasses three dimensions; consensus, satisfaction and cohesion. Consensus refers to a high frequency of agreement between partners. Satisfaction refers to a low frequency



of separation discussions, and a high frequency of shared confidences and positive thoughts about the relationship. Cohesion refers to the sense of connectedness between partners as well as the frequency of shared activities.

Brief Literature Review

Emotional Awareness

In order to have an awareness of others feelings and emotions, one must first develop an awareness of self and one’s own feelings. Emotional self awareness can be described as a co-construction, in that it develops through interaction with others (Rochat & Striano, 1999).

Greenberg, (2004) sees emotion as the key component for the construction of the self and what determines a person’s ability for self organisation. He suggests that as well as having emotions people are constantly trying to make sense of their emotions. Personal meaning emerges through the self organisation of emotional experience; this involves

the integration of reason and emotion.

The development of emotional self awareness in infancy and childhood was described by Lewis, (2000). He suggests that by eighteen months infants have developed a sense of self recognition and begin to experience self-conscious emotions such as shame, pride and embarrassment. This allows a better understanding of the self and allows more complex emotional development. During childhood, children’s emotional understanding increases alongside their cognitive development (Conway, 2000).

Parents influence their children’s social-emotional development via their own self-awareness of emotion. This is demonstrated through parental emotional expressivity, responses to the child’s emotions, and emotion talk (Warren and Stifter, 2008).

Hoffman, (2000) found that empathy appears fairly early in infants and increases across childhood. Empathy and the ability to see the other person’s perspective have been

identified as significantly related to the development and regulation of interpersonal relationships (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003).

Couple Relationships

Most people desire to be in a happy, personally satisfying romantic relationship, and attempt to realise this desire through commitment to a life-long relationship (Markman & Halford, 2005). A large amount of existing research (e.g., Johnson, 1996; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997; Greenberg, 2004; Cordova et al. 2005) indicates that emotion plays a major part in a couples ability to communicate their feelings to each other.

Various theoretical frameworks are used in research literature to explain couple relationships; these include social exchange theory, systemic theory, object relations and the psychodynamic perspective. However, most of the literature reviewed suggests couple emotional interaction can be best explained in terms of attachment processes, (Bowlby, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Johnson, 1996, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Greenberg, 2004).

Both partners are influenced in various ways by their own early relationship experiences with emotionally significant others (Draper, 2000). In couple relationships when partners are emotionally available and respond to the other's attempts at seeking closeness a sense of attachment security is achieved. On the other hand if partners are felt to be emotionally unavailable insecurities and doubts about the relationship surface. In childhood the primary care-giving relationship would seem to have a huge influence on the child's social-emotional development. From relating with significant others, infants become aware of their emotions and develop their sense of self. Parents and caregivers influence their children's emotional development by being emotionally

expressive and responding to the child's emotions. With this in mind, if as attachment theory suggests, the primary care-giving relationship is a template for all future relationships, then it would indicate a definite link between emotional awareness and the capacity to form, maintain and define the quality of relationships in adulthood. It is essential however to also consider that patterns of relating learned in the primary care-giving relationship may be modified or altered through experiences in subsequent relationships.

Emotional Awareness in Couple Relationships

Every couple is unique with each partner bringing to the relationship their own personal traits and learned way of communicating. The way in which both partners think and feel about their own worth and the others commitment to them can affect the course of their relationship. Schnarch, (1991) suggested that it is the relationship with ones' self that determines how a person handles their relationships with others, particularly in couple relationships. Both partners must accept and understand themselves rather than trying to get acceptance from their partner. Croyle and Waltz, (2002) found that when couples understand what they are feeling it allows them to engage in other important relationship behaviours such as expressing feelings, enhancing intimacy and problem solving.

Methodology

A quantitative descriptive, survey design was utilised using two self report questionnaires, The Couples Emotional Awareness Scale (CEAS) measuring couple emotional awareness and The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) measuring couple relationship quality.

Participants for the study were recruited from the two main organisations offering services to couples in Ireland; Relationships

Ireland (formerly MRCS) and ACCORD. The majority of couples were enrolled on pre-marriage courses in these organisations. Data was collected from 46 couples over a five month period. This data was then scored and entered into SPSS software for analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to identify the interrelationships between the variables:

Results

Results suggest that emotional awareness has a different role in determining relationship quality for men and women, with male levels affecting relationship quality for both partners while female levels only affect women themselves. When both partners have a high level of emotional awareness they report more satisfying and cohesive relationships, feel more connected and are more likely to share activities together. Relationship quality for men appears to be more about sharing activities and relating on a social level rather than an emotional level. For women the important determinant of relationship quality is the ability to communicate emotionally with their partner.

Men in Couple Relationships

- Men were found to vary greatly in their emotional awareness levels. They were marginally better able to identify emotions in their partner than themselves. This ability increased with the length of time in the relationship suggesting that this aspect of emotional awareness may increase over time through close couple interaction.
- Men's own level of emotional awareness was found to determine their level of connectedness or cohesion with their partners. This included the frequency of sharing activities, exchanging ideas and amount of agreement between the couple. These findings suggest that men with high emotional awareness may have the ability

to invest themselves more in the relationship thereby contributing to relationship quality for both. Likewise men with low emotional awareness are likely to feel disconnected themselves in the relationship and so may reduce couple relationship quality for their partner also.

- For men, relationship quality was not affected by their partner's level of emotional awareness.
- Relationship satisfaction was not affected for men, by either their own or their partners emotional awareness level

Women in Couple Relationships

- Women were identified as being more emotionally aware than men. They were better at recognising more complex emotions and a greater number of emotions in both themselves and their partners. Women also rated their perception of relationship quality slightly higher than men's.
- Women's relationship quality was affected by both their partner's and their own level of emotional awareness.
- Women's relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with men's level of emotional self-awareness. In other words, men who had difficulty recognising emotions in themselves contribute to their partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship.
- For women, relationship quality cohesion or the sense of connection between the couple was positively associated with male emotional awareness. This may be explained in terms of women experiencing higher levels of intimacy, closeness and relationship quality when their partner has a relatively high emotional awareness.

Partner Discrepancies in Emotional Awareness

As the partners in each couple relationship do not typically possess

the same level of emotional awareness, one of the objectives of the study was to examine how discrepancies in awareness between partners affect couple relationship quality.

- Partner discrepancies in emotional awareness were found to affect aspects of the relationship for the couple, notably a diminished sense of relationship connectedness for men and relationship dissatisfaction for women.
- Discrepancies in emotional awareness were also identified as having a greater affect on women's relationship quality more so than men's. This would seem to be associated with women generally appearing to make more of an emotional investment in the couple relationship.
- For couples, when either partner had a significantly higher or lower emotional awareness, it caused relationship dissatisfaction for women and a diminished sense of connectiveness for men.

These results suggest that relationship quality may depend on both partners having similar emotional awareness levels. It is possible that a person's need for engagement and closeness may be influenced by their emotional awareness level. Couples with low emotional awareness may not need the same connection and closeness as couples with high awareness levels. This is an area that warrants further study. Dissatisfaction and diminished sense of connection occur when there is a difference in partner emotional awareness levels. Assisting couples in reducing any discrepancies would therefore enhance their relationship.

Recommendations

This study has implications for couple education programmes and also counselling and psychotherapeutic practice. Previous research (Gottman, Fainsilber Katz and Hooven, 1996)

found that emotional awareness, self regulation and interpersonal relationships are all enhanced by recognising, accepting and validating emotions.

It would therefore be beneficial for couples to acquire such skills as developing personal insight and a greater awareness and acceptance of emotions. Emphasising to couples the significance of emotional awareness and how discrepancies in emotional awareness may affect relationship quality can only have a positive effect on their relationships.

Couple Communication Programmes

The results of the present study would be helpful in formulating couple education programmes such as Marriage Preparation and Couple Enrichment Programmes. Devising and including self-awareness and interpersonal communication exercises in these programmes offer the potential for enhancing emotional awareness and increasing relationship satisfaction for couples.

Psychotherapeutic Practice

As emotional awareness has been found to contribute to the quality of couple relationships it would be helpful to focus on increasing this aspect of couple communication when working with distressed couples. O'Connor, (2003) identified that emotional distancing was a major factor for distressed couples in Ireland. The present study also identified partner discrepancies in awareness as having a negative influence on the couple relationship. The inclusion of a measure of emotional awareness at initial couple assessment would identify any discrepancies and help guide the therapeutic process. Helping couples to understand and accept any discrepancies in emotional awareness and focusing on techniques to reduce discrepancies between partners would encourage emotional closeness between the couple.

Conclusion

This study has found that the ability to identify and express emotions in oneself and to understand one's partner's emotions is a factor in maintaining intimacy and closeness for couples.

The means of achieving intimacy and closeness seems to differ for men and women, with men valuing shared activities and relational connectedness while women prefer to share thoughts and feelings. Emotional awareness was identified as having a bigger influence on relationship quality for women. This is possibly due to female gender socialisation in childhood.

In the couple relationship it appears that women may become dissatisfied when their emotional need to be understood is not fulfilled. For men relationship quality is affected by their own level of emotional awareness. This seems to determine how much they can invest themselves in the couple relationship. In couples where there is a discrepancy in levels of emotional awareness, both partners experience reduced relationship quality with women reporting relationship dissatisfaction and men a diminished sense of connectiveness.

We are all born with a primary need for connection and relationship with others. While this need to connect with others is innate, the means of achieving it can be nurtured. Being able to identify and express emotion is a learned behaviour – it only requires education and practice. There is the potential for couples to learn how to make use of this form of communication to enhance the quality of their relationship.

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