

BRIEF REPORT

Supporting the Willingness to Express Emotions in Relationships:
The Role of Perceived Empathic Effort and Interpersonal AccuracyJenny Diem Van Le and Harry T. Reis
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Expressing emotions with others can be difficult as it puts individuals in a position of potential vulnerability. Research suggests that people are willing to express their emotions with communal partners; however, few studies have examined processes that might explain how this occurs. Using a cross-sectional design, we examined interpersonal accuracy and empathic effort as factors that support the likelihood of expression in communal relationships. Participants ($N = 219$) reported the communal motivation, accuracy, and effort they perceived from five targets varying in closeness (e.g., best friend, acquaintance, etc.); they rated their likelihood of expressing happiness, pride, gratitude, sadness, anxiety, guilt, and anger with each target. Perceived accuracy and effort were both significant mediators of the association between perceived communal motivation and reported likelihood of expressing all emotions. Perceived accuracy was a stronger predictor of the likelihood of expression than effort. These findings indicate that perceiving greater accuracy and effort each independently supports a greater likelihood of expression. A willingness to express emotions is critical to developing close relationships and the current work identifies processes that may encourage this willingness.

Keywords: emotional expression, communal motivation, empathy, effort, interpersonal accuracy

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People often share their emotions with others. Although emotional expression occurs naturally in some relationships, it is unlikely or even inappropriate in other relationships (Clark & Taraban, 1991). Previous research has shown that individuals report greater willingness to express positive and negative emotions with partners who care for their welfare (Von Culin et al., 2018), commonly known as communal partners (Le et al., 2018). Expressing emotions is critical in communal relationships as it allows people to convey their needs and gives their partners the opportunity to respond supportively (Graham et al., 2008).

Existing research assumes that people are more willing to be emotionally open with communal partners because these partners are likely to respond with support rather than distance or exploitation (Clark & Finkel, 2005). However, the specific processes responsible

for expression in communal contexts are not well understood. Individuals may be more willing to be emotionally open in communal relationships because they believe these partners exert more empathic effort—that is, these partners try harder to understand how they feel. Alternatively, individuals may believe that these partners are more interpersonally accurate, or more accurately understand how they feel, and this supports emotional openness. The present study explores these two processes as possible explanations for why people are more willing to express emotions with communal partners.

Interpersonal accuracy refers to the ability to accurately assess the emotions of others (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2018). In previous studies, perceivers and expressers both reported greater relationship satisfaction when perceivers accurately inferred the negative emotions of expressers (Sened et al., 2017). Individuals who accurately perceived the negative emotions of others were also more likely to provide help when needed (Eckland et al., 2020), suggesting that the enhanced understanding afforded by interpersonal accuracy allows people to better support others' needs (Simpson et al., 2001). In close relationships, satisfaction was also greater when people perceived that their partners accurately understood their emotions during conflict (Gordon & Chen, 2016).

Though interpersonal accuracy allows people to better understand others' needs, accuracy itself may not be sufficient to promote emotional disclosure. Previous studies have shown that expressers do not feel understood when their romantic partner is accurate but lacks empathy (Winczewski et al., 2016). Rather, partners who were both accurate and empathic were perceived to be understanding, which research has shown facilitates emotional openness in relationships (Ruan et al., 2020). The willingness and motivation to feel and

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express empathy for others characterize empathic effort (Cohen et al., 2012). Specifically, empathic effort is conceptualized as the attempt to understand and share others' emotions by investing the necessary time or energy to feel and express empathy (Schumann et al., 2014). Research with married couples has found that the effort individuals expend to understand their partner's emotions is positively associated with their partner's relationship satisfaction, independent of accuracy (Cohen et al., 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009).

Although empathic effort and interpersonal accuracy likely co-occur, it is important to study them as distinct constructs. In some circumstances, accurately understanding another person feels easy and requires minimal effort. Other times it is taxing, for instance, when an event is so distressing that individuals become preoccupied with their own distress or choose to avoid others' distress (Zaki & Cikara, 2015). In these instances, people may fail to empathize because they are unwilling rather than unable to do so (Weisz et al., 2021), suggesting that the issue may be a lack of empathic effort rather than an inability to be accurate. Thus, examining how the unique effects of perceiving effort versus perceiving accuracy influence the likelihood of expression represents an informative contribution.

Because individuals are more likely to express their emotions in certain relationships over others (Von Culin et al., 2018), we sought to identify how different partners support expression. Hence, we focused on within-person differences, that is, variation in one's likelihood of expression with different targets, over and above variation due to one's general likelihood to express emotions. To do so, we observed the likelihood of expression across several relationships varying in communal motivation. Additionally, we studied negatively and positively valenced emotions, to explore whether our predictions would generalize. Negative emotions (sadness, anxiety, guilt, and anger) that convey vulnerability or distress and require support or reassurance from partners were selected; positive emotions (happiness, pride, and gratitude) that call for celebration and capitalization from partners were selected (Conoley et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2018; Van Kleef, 2016).

In the present study, we aimed to (a) replicate prior research showing that variations in the communal motivation perceived across different targets predicted fluctuations in the likelihood of expressing emotions with those targets, and (b) extend upon this finding by examining whether accuracy and effort perceived from those targets independently account for variations in the likelihood of expression. Based on the prior work, we propose one model of these processes; however, we test alternative models with the main goal of exploring whether accuracy and effort are both processes that promote the likelihood of expression. For exploratory purposes, we also examined whether perceived accuracy or effort was a stronger predictor of the likelihood of expression. The following hypotheses were preregistered on AsPredicted:

Hypothesis 1: Perceiving more communal motivation from a specific target predicts a greater likelihood of expressing emotions with that target, after accounting for the average communal motivation perceived across all targets.

Hypothesis 2: The association between perceived communal motivation and the likelihood to express emotions with that target is mediated by perceived accuracy, after accounting for effects of perceived effort.

Hypothesis 3: The association between perceived communal motivation and the likelihood to express emotions with that target is mediated by perceived effort, after accounting for effects of perceived accuracy.

Method

Participants

Using Optimal Design Version 3.01 (Spybrook et al., 2011), we estimated variability between communal motivation and emotional expression as 1.00 (Cohen's $d = 0.50$); 181 individuals were needed to provide 90% power ($\alpha = .05$). After screening for inattention, our final analytic sample included 219 participants from Research Match and Prolific.¹ Participants were White (80.8%), Black or African American (2.7%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.5%), Asian (2.3%), Hispanic, Spanish, or Latin American (11.0%), or other self-described racial identities (2.7%). Participants' mean age was 49.4 years. Participants were 61.6% female, 33.8% male, 3.2% nonbinary, and three did not report gender.

Procedure

This research received ethical approval from the University of Rochester Research Subjects Review Board. Participants described their relationship with five targets: a close family member, best friend, distant relative, acquaintance, and distant friend. These targets were selected as they include relationships high, moderate, and low in communal motivation, allowing sufficient range for analyses (Figure 1 in the additional online materials). Participants reported the extent that they would be willing to express seven different emotions with each target. Lastly, participants judged the degree of accuracy and effort each target would exhibit in understanding their emotions.

Measures

Participants indicated agreement with items using 7-point scales. Targets' initials were piped into all items. See the additional online materials for all items.

Perceived Communal Motivation

Participants reported the communal motivation they perceived from each target using five items, for example, "TARGET cares for my needs" ($\alpha = .78-.83$, $M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.65$; Lemay, 2014).

Likelihood of Expression

Participants reported their likelihood of expressing happiness, pride (about a personal accomplishment), gratitude, sadness, anxiety, guilt, and anger with each target using a single item ($\alpha = .88-.90$, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.69$), adapted from Von Culin et al. (2018).

Perceived Interpersonal Accuracy and Empathic Effort

Participants reported the degree to which each target would demonstrate interpersonal accuracy ($\alpha = .82-.91$, $M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.71$)

¹ Results held when excluded participants ($N = 145$) were included; see Table 5 in the additional online materials.

and empathic effort ($\alpha = .88-.95$, $M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.73$) if they were to express each emotion. The items used were generated for this study. Accuracy items included: "TARGET would see things exactly how I see them"; "TARGET would completely understand the situation from my point of view"; "TARGET would be really good at knowing how I was feeling." Effort items included: "TARGET would put in a lot of effort to see things from my perspective"; "TARGET would really try to understand the situation from my point of view"; "TARGET would put a lot of thought into figuring out how I was feeling." An exploratory factor analysis with these items supported treating accuracy and effort as distinct factors (Table 1 in the additional online materials).²

Results

Using Mplus 8, multilevel structural equation models (MSEMs) that incorporated the nested nature of the data (i.e., multiple target ratings within individuals) were specified to test whether perceived accuracy and effort each mediate the association between perceived communal motivation and the likelihood of expressing each emotion (see Figure 1). Perceived accuracy and effort were correlated and entered simultaneously to test their respective indirect effects. Separate models were specified for each emotion, resulting in seven models (Figures 8.1–8.7 in the additional online materials). Models were run with random intercepts; models with random slopes did not converge. MSEMs implicitly subjected all Level-1 variables to group-mean centering, which partitioned each observed Level-1 variable into latent within and between components (Preacher et al., 2010). We focus on the within-person level for our analyses. Calculation of the within-person percentage of variance for all key outcome variables ranged from 37.8% to 52.2% (Table 4 in the additional online materials), indicating that exploring within-person effects was appropriate.

Perceived Communal Motivation Predicting Likelihood of Expression

Analyses showed that the total effects of perceived communal motivation from a target on the likelihood of expressing all seven emotions with that target were significant ($Bs = 0.80-0.89$, $SEs = 0.02-0.03$, $ps < .001$; see Table 1). This indicates that participants were more willing to express their emotions with targets whom they perceived care for their welfare, replicating Von Culin et al.'s (2018) findings and supporting Hypothesis 1.

Perceived Accuracy and Effort as Parallel Mediators

Tests of Hypotheses 2 and 3 showed that perceived accuracy and effort each significantly mediated the association between perceived communal motivation and the likelihood of expressing all emotions, except guilt.³ For example, the indirect effects of perceived accuracy ($B = 0.13$, $p = .001$) and effort ($B = 0.12$, $p = .014$) significantly mediated the association between perceived communal motivation and the likelihood of expressing happiness. Tests of the individual paths showed that perceiving more communal motivation was associated with perceiving a target as more accurate (a_1 path: $B = 0.58$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$) and effortful (a_2 path: $B = 0.68$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$). Additionally, perceiving a target as more accurate was associated with a greater likelihood of expressing happiness, after controlling for perceived effort (b_1 path: $B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$).

Perceiving a target as more effortful was also associated with a greater likelihood of expressing happiness, after controlling for perceived accuracy (b_2 path: $B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .012$). This same pattern of effects was found for expressions of pride, gratitude, sadness, anxiety, and anger, as Table 1 shows. For guilt, however, the indirect effect of perceived accuracy ($B = 0.18$, $p < .001$) was significant whereas the indirect effect of effort was not ($B = 0.06$, $p = .137$). Collectively, these findings support Hypotheses 1–3.

Exploratory Analyses

To test whether the indirect effects through perceived accuracy and effort differed, unconstrained and constrained models were specified. Across all emotions, analyses indicated significantly poorer fit when the indirect effects of accuracy and effort were constrained to be equal, compared to a fully unconstrained model that allowed these effects to vary (Chen, 2007; Satorra & Bentler, 2001). This indicates that the indirect effects of accuracy are significantly larger than the indirect effects of effort for all emotions except pride, denoting that mediation via accuracy is greater than mediation via effort. Table 6 in the additional online materials reports full analyses.

To explore possible alternative models, we first evaluated the fit of a parallel mediation model, in which perceived accuracy and perceived effort independently inform perceived communal motivation, which in turn influences the likelihood of expression. Comparison of fit indexes indicated that this alternative parallel mediation model provided a worse fit than our proposed parallel mediation model (see Figure 9.1 in the additional online materials and Table 7).

Additionally, we examined two alternative serial mediation models (see Figure 9.2 in the additional online materials) in which accuracy and effort form a causal chain: (1) perceived communal motivation informs perceived effort, which informs perceived accuracy, which then influences likelihood of expression; and (2) perceived communal motivation informs perceived accuracy, which informs perceived effort, which then influences likelihood of expression. Both serial mediation models provided equal fit indexes as our proposed mediation model, indicating that they are not mathematically differentiable. Thus, we are unable to select between these serial mediation models and our proposed parallel mediation model. Collectively, however, these models all consistently support perceived interpersonal accuracy and perceived empathic effort as distinct processes that contribute to the likelihood of expression in communal relationships.

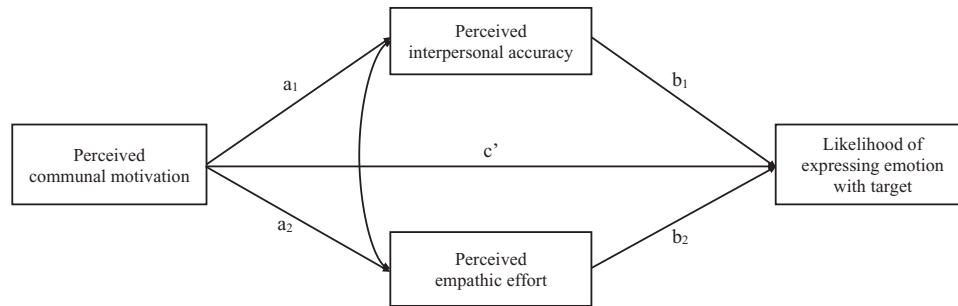
Discussion

Previous work has demonstrated that individuals are more willing to express emotions in highly communal relationships (Clark & Finkel, 2005; Von Culin et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2011). The present findings expand upon this conclusion, suggesting that perceiving relational partners as accurate and effortful are distinct processes that may contribute to people's willingness to express emotions in

² See Tables 1 and 2 in the additional online materials for exploratory factor analysis and correlations of accuracy and effort items.

³ See the additional online materials for details and discussion.

Figure 1
Parallel Mediation Model for Each Emotion



close relationships. One limitation of the current study is that we tested mediation in cross-sectional data, which does not allow us to evaluate causal direction within the models proposed (Mackinnon & Fairchild, 2009). Also, participants' reports of their likelihood of expressing emotions may not reflect actual expressions, due to people's limited ability to forecast their own and other's affective behaviors (Loewenstein, 2007). Future research should examine the impact of perceived accuracy and effort by observing emotional expressions in live interactions. It would also be compelling to experimentally manipulate perceived communal motivation and observe actual expression in real time. Additionally, future work might consider other factors that affect our perception of others' accuracy and effort (e.g., perceived similarity, existing relationship knowledge) and conditions in which perceiving higher communal motivation predicts lower expression, for instance, when an emotion

is directly caused by a partner and people inhibit expression to protect the partner's feelings.

This research sought to advance understanding of why individuals are more willing to express emotions with communal partners. Comparing indirect effects showed that perceiving that a partner accurately understands one's emotions is a relatively stronger predictor of one's willingness to express, compared to perceiving a partner's effort. When gauging the potential vulnerability of expressing emotions to others, perceiving accuracy may matter more than effort because it allows us to anticipate others' reactions to our disclosure. Perceiving that partners will accurately understand one's anger may minimize the fear that they might respond inappropriately or with hostility, which further validates our emotions. Nevertheless, we found that perceiving effort may also promote expression. Perceiving effort presumes that a partner is

Table 1
The Indirect, Total, and Direct Effects of Perceived Communal Motivation Predicting Likelihood of Expression

Emotion	Indirect effect (accuracy a_1 , b_1)						Indirect effect (effort a_2 , b_2)						Correlation (accuracy with effort)
	B (β)	SE	z	p	95% CI		B (β)	SE	z	p	95% CI		
					LL	UL					LL	UL	
Happiness	0.130 (.115)	0.039	3.314	.001	0.053	0.207	0.119 (.105)	0.048	2.464	.014	0.024	0.214	.637
Pride	0.125 (.106)	0.039	3.193	.001	0.048	0.202	0.130 (.110)	0.050	2.596	.009	0.032	0.228	.431
Gratitude	0.142 (.123)	0.041	3.486	<.001	0.062	0.222	0.125 (.108)	0.049	2.548	.011	0.029	0.221	.651
Sadness	0.164 (.138)	0.040	4.067	<.001	0.085	0.243	0.089 (.075)	0.046	1.952	.051	0.000	0.179	.623
Anxiety	0.165 (.141)	0.038	4.351	<.001	0.091	0.240	0.126 (.108)	0.049	2.576	.010	0.030	0.223	.679
Guilt	0.178 (.155)	0.034	5.243	<.001	0.112	0.245	0.061 (.053)	0.041	1.487	.137	−0.019	0.141	.690
Anger	0.116 (.096)	0.039	2.930	.003	0.038	0.193	0.088 (.073)	0.043	2.024	.043	0.003	0.172	.669
Emotion	Total effect (c)						Direct effect (c')						
	B (β)	SE	z	p	95% CI		B (β)	SE	z	p	95% CI		
					LL	UL					LL	UL	
Happiness	0.824 (.729)	0.027	30.861	<.001	0.772	0.876	0.575 (.509)	0.045	12.808	<.001	0.487	0.663	
Pride	0.892 (.754)	0.024	37.633	<.001	0.846	0.939	0.637 (.539)	0.043	14.843	<.001	0.553	0.721	
Gratitude	0.811 (.702)	0.026	30.703	<.001	0.759	0.862	0.544 (.471)	0.046	11.887	<.001	0.454	0.634	
Sadness	0.878 (.740)	0.025	35.379	<.001	0.829	0.927	0.625 (.527)	0.042	14.838	<.001	0.542	0.708	
Anxiety	0.857 (.730)	0.024	35.456	<.001	0.809	0.904	0.565 (.482)	0.040	14.247	<.001	0.487	0.643	
Guilt	0.801 (.696)	0.027	30.203	<.001	0.749	0.853	0.561 (.488)	0.040	14.124	<.001	0.484	0.639	
Anger	0.854 (.710)	0.025	33.954	<.001	0.804	0.903	0.651 (.541)	0.043	15.230	<.001	0.567	0.734	

Note. Indirect effects via accuracy, indirect effects via effort, total effects, and direct effects of perceived communal motivation from targets (within-person) predicting reported likelihood to express each emotion. Path coefficients (a_1 , a_2 , b_1 , b_2 effects) can be found in Figures 8.1–8.7 in the additional online materials. Correlations between accuracy and effort for each emotion (across all targets) were transformed to Fisher's z s, averaged, and the mean z s were back-transformed to r s. All models presented were run with random intercepts only; models with random slopes did not converge.

motivated to try to understand, even when it may be challenging or taxing. When partners expend the effort to understand, they prioritize the discloser's feelings over whatever else they might be experiencing at that moment, such as their own discomfort. Effort signals a willingness to consider the partner's emotional needs, acceptance of the partner's emotions as authentic, and commitment to the relationship. Thus, both accuracy and effort appear to contribute to the willingness to express emotions in close relationships.

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