

Emotional Awareness is Related to Love, Conflict, and Ambivalence in Newly Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

Moving in together is a time of transition. While research suggests that emotional awareness (EA) is associated with relationship satisfaction in committed couples, there is little research on how EA may affect endorsements of love, conflict, and ambivalence in newly cohabiting couples. Ratings of love, conflict, and ambivalence (Braiker-Kelly Partnership Questionnaire), and EA were measured in 100 newly cohabiting couples. Results indicate that after controlling for relationship satisfaction, there was a significant interaction between EA and sex. Men with low EA reported less feelings of love $F(1,76) = 10.8, p = .002$ when compared to both men with high EA, and all women. In contrast, EA was found to be negatively related to both conflict ($b = -.13, t(77) = 2.14, p = .04$) and ambivalence ($b = -.15, t(77) = -2.12, p = .04$). Results suggest that EA may be an important factor for relationship cohesion in transitioning couples.

Background

- Marital satisfaction is an important marker for both mental and physical health (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014).
- Marital satisfaction has been found to be higher when an individual rates their partner higher in emotional intelligence (Schutte, et.al. 2001).
- In addition, trait mindfulness has been found to have a connection to romantic relationship well-being as well as lower emotional stress responses (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007).
- Research has suggested that there are gender differences in emotional awareness in different situations (i.e. casual situations vs. in the context of romantic relationships; Croyle, & Waltz, 2002).
- Couples where both partners are low in emotional awareness also have the lowest scores on encouragement, depth, and positive relationship quality as well as the highest scores on conflict (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005).

Study Aim: To understand the association between individual emotional awareness and love, conflict, and ambivalence. **Hypotheses:** We predicted that individuals who display high emotional awareness experience greater feelings of love, fewer instances of intense conflict, and infrequent feelings of ambivalence, we also predict that this effect would be higher for women versus men.

Methods

Procedures: Data were collected as part of the Love, Anger, and Food (LAF) study that examined eating, exercise, emotion regulation, and weight maintenance in newly cohabiting couples. Data were collected using surveys (both baseline and daily diary), as well as through height and weight measurements.

Participants:

N= 96 (married or unmarried) heterosexual couples (192 individuals) within the first 6 months of cohabitation.

Measures:

- Emotional Awareness (EA) Scale : Subscale from the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS); 7-point Likert scale (1 - 7) with higher scores suggesting higher EA (Gratz, & Roemer, 2004).
- Braiker-Kelly Partnership Questionnaire measuring (1) Feelings of love: emotional, mental, and physical attraction to their partner; (2) Conflict: frequency and intensity of disputes; and (3) Ambivalence: feelings of indecisiveness towards their partner.

Data Analyses and Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

	Mean(SD)	Range
Age	26.8(8.8)	18.3 - 69.4
Relationship Satisfaction	6.5(1)	1-7
Relationship Duration (Months)	22.6(15.6)	1-72
Children	0.05(0.23)	0-1
Emotional Awareness	5.8(1.1)	1-7
Love	5.2(0.69)	1.7 - 6
Conflict	2(1)	1.4-5.8
Ambivalence	1.2(1.2)	0-6

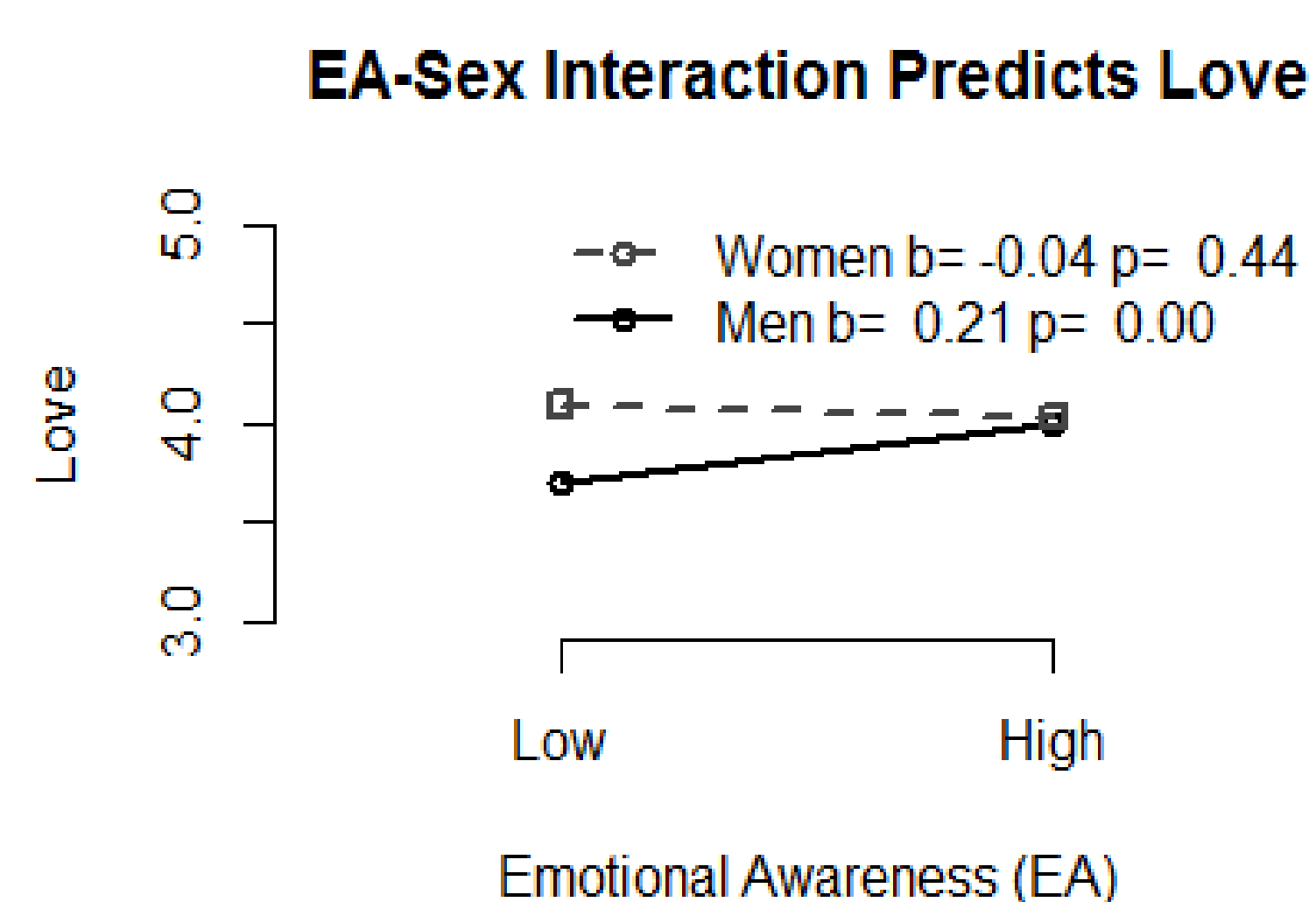
Race/Ethnicity (N = 200)*

	Total(%)
Hispanic	45(23.8%)
White	126(65.6%)
Black	3(1.6%)
Asian	6(3.1%)
Other	40(20.8%)
Married	29(15.1%)
Income	
0-25K	130(67.7%)
25-50K	31(16.1%)
50-75K	21(10.9%)
75->150K	8(4.2%)

SD = standard deviation; * not all participants answered all sociodemographic questions

Data Analysis:

- Three multi-level models were utilized to account for the interdependence of couple data. Love, conflict, and ambivalence were the three model outcomes.
- In each model, we controlled for relationship satisfaction, and relationship duration.
- An interaction between emotional awareness (EA) and sex was included in all models, however, only one significant interaction (predicting love) was found thus, the interaction was removed from the models in which the interaction was not a significant predictor of the outcome.
- These models include the model in which conflict, and ambivalence were the outcomes.



Results:

- Men with low EA reported less feelings of love towards their partner $F(1,76) = 10.8, p = .002$ when compared to both men with high EA, and all women.
- In contrast, EA was found to be negatively related to both conflict ($b = -.13, t(77) = 2.14, p = .04$) and ambivalence ($b = -.15, t(77) = -2.12, p = .04$).

Conclusions and Implications

Findings:

After controlling for relationship satisfaction, we found a significant interaction between sex and emotional awareness (EA), such that men at low levels of EA, reported less feelings of love when compared to both men with high levels of EA, and all women. EA was also negatively related to both conflict and ambivalence.

Implications:

- These results suggest that emotional awareness may be a significant factor in overall relationship satisfaction, and have effects on mental and physical health. For example, ambivalence is positively associated with poor health (Uchino, et.al., 2012).
- Further research is needed to assess differing age groups, duration of cohabitation, and sexual orientation.

Limitations:

- Future studies should include men and women who have lived together for longer periods of time.
- Data was collected all at once and analyses utilized a cross sectional data set, therefore it is difficult to assert causal links.
- The answers provided by the individuals were done so through self-report, leaving room for inaccuracies and bias.

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