HOW COUPLE MEMBERS VIEW ROMANTIC CONFLICT EVENTS: EXTRACTING THEMES USING COMPUTERIZED TEXT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined romantic conflict themes using couple narratives. We explored how these themes were similar and different from those identified in previous literature. One hundred four heterosexual undergraduate couple members (52 couples) were interviewed separately about specific events in which they and their partners met or did not meet each other's needs. The meaning extraction method was then used to obtain common conflict words to assess how couple members used language to think about themselves and their partners. Factor analyses resulted in four interpretable themes for both the self- (difficulty recognizing the problem, thinking about how the event turned out, insufficient companionship, and negative emotion) and partner-viewpoint (negative emotion when talking, thinking about and dealing with the problem, insufficient companionship, and negative emotion). There were notable similarities and differences based on viewpoint, and with regard to past research.

INTRODUCTION

The transition between adolescence and emerging adulthood is characterized by the development of more serious and intimate, as well as longer lasting, romantic relationships (Furman & Winkle, 2012). Mastering skills for healthy romantic relationships is a key developmental task for emerging adults that is related to future adjustment (Collibee & Furman, 2009). By emerging adulthood romantic conflict is common and typically related to unmet relationship needs (Le & Agnew, 2001). Emerging adults must learn to balance their needs with the needs of their partners in order to maintain and encourage healthy relationships (Feiring, Jashar, Heleniak, 2010). When romantic partners are able to negotiate their differences, relationships become more intimate and supportive (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Positive outcomes of such healthy romantic relationships include physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013; Simon & Furman, 2010). However, constructively managing conflict about unmet needs is challenging. When conflict is poorly managed, negative consequences for the relationship and couple members are likely, such as verbal and physical aggression, stress, and decreased satisfaction (Crane & Testa, 2014; Simon & Furman, 2010).

According to social information processing theory, the ways in which people construe and evaluate specific instances of conflict is important in guiding future behavior (Mathiesen et al., 2011). The large body of research on attachment representation consistently demonstrates an association between such representations and couple behavior, for example with sexual behavior and caregiving (Jones & Furman, 2011). Other work suggests that constructive representations about conflict are associated with relationship-oriented goals and negotiation between partners, while destructive representations are related to self-centered goals and negative behavior, such as aggression or excessive compliance (Simon, Kobielski, & Martin, 2008). Yet this literature concerns more global representations of relationships and most work on romantic conflict generally does not focus on event-specific representations of conflict (Mathiesen et al., 2011; Feiring et al., 2010; Simon et al., 2008). Event-specific representations of conflict are the ways in which couple members use language in order to comprehend and interpret specific romantic conflict events (Le & Agnew, 2001; Feiring et al., 2010). Event-specific representations are thought to be the building blocks for global representation of romantic

relationships (Mathiesen et al., 2011; Feiring et al., 2010). In order to address the scarcity of research on specific representations, our study concerned how couple members made meaning of their own and their partner's unmet needs through examining narratives about specific conflict events.

Research on the romantic relationships of emerging adults typically uses self-report rating scales and observational methods (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Yet, narratives, rather than these other assessment approaches, are ideal for taping event-specific representations of romantic conflict because they demonstrate how couple members make-meaning out of their own romantic experiences. This approach allows participants to discuss events in their lives that are not only important to them but also self-defining (Frost, 2013). This strategy also reveals how couple members learn from reflection on specific past events in their romantic relationship. Such event-specific representations of past conflict guide future behavior and tap into individual construals (Breen & McLean, 2009). Unlike observational or rating methods, narratives allow couple members to provide a personalized viewpoint on past conflict events. While rating scales provide information about a person's explicit thoughts and actions related to their romantic relationship, narratives can reveal both explicit and implicit cognitions or expectations outside of awareness (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; Feiring et al., 2010). Despite these benefits to using narratives, this method is used infrequently because it is labor intensive (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005). However, with the availability of new techniques and related software, analysis of themes from narratives has become less time consuming (Boyd, 2016; Chung & Pennebaker, 2008).

We used the Meaning Extraction Method (MEM) in order to quantify and examine themes within couple members' narrative about romantic conflict experiences (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008). Like other text analysis methods, such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015), the MEM is grounded in the idea that words in a narrative will cluster together because they are similar with regard to a theme and are psychologically meaningful. A key advantage of the MEM procedure is that it identifies themes from word clusters in personalized narratives that are derived from the speaker's not the researcher's perspective. Instead of using predetermined themes, the MEM can be used to identify common and natural ways that people think about themselves and their relationships. MEM uses qualitative data that is examined through rigorous quantitative and statistical methodology. Past research using MEM reveals new insights into how people interpret a variety of life experiences such as those related to personality development, sexual self-views, and depression. In a study of college students, MEM was used to examine 1165 open-ended self-descriptive essays to find seven psychologically meaningful personality themes, ranging from evaluation to maturity (Chung and Pennebaker, 2008). Another study examined 239 women's narratives about their feelings towards sex and sexuality and found seven themes, ranging from virginity to relationships (Stanton et al., 2015). A third study analyzed 404 English posts and 400 Spanish posts from a breast cancer forum in order to examine how depression is expressed over the Internet. Across both languages the researchers found the themes of treatment, family, and school, with other different themes occurring for the English and Spanish participations, such as disclosure and hopelessness, respectively (Ramirez-Esparza, Chung, Kacewicz, & Pennebaker, 2008). MEM has not been used to analyze couple member's romantic conflict themes within narratives.

In this study, MEM was used to address the limited research concerning event-specific representations of romantic conflict events. Although narrative research is mostly absent, there is a rich literature on constructs that help explain how couple members understand and experience conflict. The study of couple member's perceptions of power, for example, is related to how the partners understand and behave in romantic relationships (Righetti et al., 2015). During conflict interactions, greater perceptions of power lower couple members' ability to take the viewpoint of their partner if they are focused more on themselves then the relationship. On the other hand, power has the ability to increase perspective-taking if a person is partner-focused (Gordon & Chen, 2013). Negative emotions are another important aspect of conflict, which serve to motivate destructive and constructive conflict management strategies. Conflict in couples often provokes negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and stress, which are associated with poor relationship health (Sanford, 2007). Romantic conflict is also related to various support functions that may or may not be fulfilled by a partner. These relationship functions can range from intimacy, which is a sense of emotional closeness, to security, which is related to the stability and

health of the relationship (Furman, 1989). Conflict within romantic relationships is also linked to the attribution of negative partner behavior as either selfish or intentional. Perceptions of intentional harming by a partner, also known as blame attributions, increases the likelihood of further conflict (Durtschi, Ming Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011). Partner-blame is commonly associated with stress, depression, and less problem-solving behavior in couples (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which relationship themes that emerged from narratives about romantic relationship conflict were similar and different from those identified in previous literature using other methods. Because of the substantial amounts of literature on power, negative emotions, relationship needs, and blame, we anticipated that the narratives on romantic relationship conflict would demonstrate these themes. Since couple members were asked to discuss conflict in their relationships, we anticipated that negative emotions, which are common during conflict, and unmet relationship needs which were the focus of the interview, would be identified. Because emerging adult romantic relationships tend to be more egalitarian we expected that the theme of power would be less prominent (Vogel, Murphy, Werner-Wilson, Cutrona, & Seeman, 2007). We had no overall expectations for the theme of blame. Beyond themes noted from previous literature using methods other than narratives, we anticipated that different themes might emerge because narratives tap representations of conflict that can be outside of awareness (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005).

In this study, we were particularly interested in the extent to which themes differed as a function of viewpoint, that is whether couple members were narrating events about their own or their partner's unmet needs. Past research examining viewpoint, especially with regard to romantic relationships, is limited. Nevertheless, work on attribution bias and the interpretation of relationship transgressions suggests that there are important differences in how individuals construe and evaluate experiences. Attribution theory indicates that there is an actor-observer effect, meaning that people will process information differently based on whether they are taking a self or other's point of view (Robins, Spranca, & Mendelsohn, 1996). For example, the fundamental attribution error, the tendency to explain another's behavior using personality attributes and the self by aspects of the situation, may be important for understanding how couple members interpret or behave during instances of conflict (Sillars, 1980; Tetlock, 1985). Although not focused on romantic relationships, research on children's narratives about transgressions between peers considered how the viewpoint of a victim (self-viewpoint) and perpetrator (partner-viewpoint) was related to how they made sense of conflict (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). When narrating from the victim's compared to the perpetrator's viewpoint, children were more emotionally charged and emphasized their own personal experience during conflict. When narrating from the perpetrator's compared to the victim's viewpoint, children were more likely to focus on the offence committed to the other child, and discuss the sadness, anger, and thoughts of the other person. In a study using romantic narratives, emerging adults described a situation in which they were told a lie by their partner (victim) and in which they told a lie to their partner (perpetrator; Kaplar & Gordon, 2004). When narrating from the victim's (lie-receiver) compared to the perpetrator's (lie-teller) viewpoint, emerging adults discussed greater levels of negative emotion, particularly anger, because less altruistic motivations were attributed to the partner. When narrating from the lie-teller's compared to the lie-receiver's viewpoint, emerging adults sought to justify their reasons for lying behavior; for example, they were more likely to attribute their lying to altruism. Based on this limited research, we predicted that narratives told from the self- (victim) compared to the partner-viewpoint (perpetrator) would contain more themes related to negative emotion and blaming the partner. We also expected that narratives told from the partner- compared to the self-viewpoint would be characterized by themes concerning attempts to justify their transgressive behavior and to understand the feelings and thoughts of their partner.

METHOD

Participants
The participants were comprised of 104 couple members (52 couples) at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) between the ages of 18 and 22 years old (M = 19.72, SD = 1.05). In order to be eligible for the study, both students had to be attending TCNJ, and had to have been in an exclusive relationship with

their partner for at least three months or longer. The relationships ranged between 3-36 months in duration, with the average being 14 months (M = 13.72, SD = 8.55). The sample consisted of predominately White (74%) participants, as well as Hispanics (13.5%), Asians (2.9%), African Americans (1.9%), and participants of other minorities (7.7%). Couple members reported that they originally met as strangers (33.7%), as friends (32.7%), through other friends (17.3%), and as acquaintances (16.3%).

Procedure
All of the procedures for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of TCNJ. Male and female interviewers were trained by the laboratory instructor, Dr. Candice Feiring, to collect and transcribe the relationship narratives. After obtaining informed consent couple members were interviewed separately, using semi-structured interview probes about met and unmet relationship needs. The interview portion of the study was divided into two parts with the first focused on the self-viewpoint (times the speaker's needs were and were not met) and the second on the partner-viewpoint (times the speaker did or did not meet the partner's needs), The interviews ranged from 20-123 minutes, with the average being 48 minutes (M = 47.53, SD = 19.70). For the purposes of our study, we only examined the unmet needs narratives.
　　　Following the interview, participants completed an online survey that included various measures of relationship functioning. Participants were then debriefed and provided with a resources sheet outlining different on-campus counseling and psychological services. Couple members were compensated for their participation with either class credit, or with money. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim, de-identifying any personal information in order to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. The total number of words spoken by participants in the unmet portions of transcribed interviews for the total sample ranged from 820-9967 words, with the average being 2761 words (M = 2760.93, SD = 1610.98).

Language Analysis
Our research focused on the self-unmet and partner-unmet portions of the transcriptions in order to analyze events and feelings related to conflict. Transcriptions were trimmed to include only these portions of the interview, minus any interviewer speech in these sections. These trimmed transcriptions were converted to two text files, with one for each of the self- and partner- sections separately. In order to examine couple members' views of conflict, MEM was used to analyze each of these text files through the Meaning Extraction Helper (MEH, Boyd, 2016); a software that determines word prominence. The first step of MEH involved the conversion of any words with regard to common misspellings (e.g., "teh" to "the") or textisms (e.g., "bf" to "boyfriend") to recognizable words. This first step also included the lemmatization of words, or the conversion of all words to their basic inflection (e.g., "missing", "missed", and "misses" were converted to "miss"). Secondly, the option to have stop words and default conversations was added in order to eliminate any nonsense words that would not be useful for our analyses (e.g., "oeoh", "hmm", and "ita"). Third, the n-grams, or the number of words that would be analyzed at once (e.g. "she" is one n-gram and "she did that" is three n-grams), was left at 1. Fourth, the minimum observable word count was left at the default of one, and the minimum observable percentage for the content words was made 7.5%, as done in past research (Stanton et al., 2015).
　　　After completing these steps, the MEH software was run for the self-unmet and partner-unmet text files. The first data extraction contained the content words in order of percent observed in the texts at or above 7.5%, and the frequency of each word within and across participants' text. The second data extraction had the content words binary scores (1 = present, 0 = not present). Eliminating any remaining nonsense words (e.g. "tknow" and "therea") or irrelevant words (e.g. "big" and "like"), we identified the top 30 words for the self-unmet and partner-unmet, and the binary scores for these words were used in the analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Self- and Partner-Unmet Needs

The number of words seen in transcribed interviews for self-unmet (M = 1481.73, SD = 987.34) was greater than that for the partner-unmet needs (M = 1279.20, SD = 762.08) needs (paired t[103] = 2.88, p = .005). Table 1 contains the ranked ordered most prevalent (Yes/No) 30 words for each of the self- and partner-viewpoints. The top 10 most common words for the self-viewpoint reflected themes from past research. The words "see", "talk", "thought", and "understand" matched the theme of support functions, with the word "upset" tapping into the theme of negative emotions. The top of Table 2 displays the 30 most frequently used words for the self-viewpoint as they relate to themes from previous literature; 40% of these words fit such themes. As expected, the themes of negative emotion and support functions were present, whereas the themes of power and blame were not. In terms of negative emotions, there were five words that fit this theme, ranging from the word "upset", mentioned by almost three-fourths of couple members, to "frustrate", voiced by around a two-fifths of the participants. Negative emotions words grouped around anger ("angry", "mad", "annoy", and "frustrate") and more general negative emotional feelings ("upset"). With regard to support functions, there were seven words that tapped into this theme, ranging from "see", mention by a large majority of couple members, to the word "give", voiced by almost two-fifths of participants. Support function words clustered around companionship ("see", "together", "hang", and "meet"), intimacy ("talk" and "understand"), and nurturance ("give").

As shown on the right of Table 1, the 10 most common words for the partner-viewpoint fit themes from previous literature. The words "talk", "see", "thought", and "understand" were related to the theme of support functions, while "upset" tapped into the theme of negative emotions. Comparing the 10 most common words from the self and partner-viewpoints, 80% of the words were the same, except for "happen" and "end" from the self-viewpoint, and "right" and "told" from the partner-viewpoint. The word "see" was the most common for the self-viewpoint, while for the partner-viewpoint "upset" was the most common. The bottom of Table 2 displays the top 30 most frequently mentioned words for the partner-viewpoint as they fit themes from past research. Of these words, 43.33% fit themes identified from past research. As predicted, the themes of negative emotions and support functions were found in the narratives, whereas the theme of power and blame were not. In terms of negative emotions, there were six words that tapped into this theme, ranging from the word "upset", voiced by almost three-fourths of couple members, to "mad", mentioned by around a third of the participants. Similar to the self-viewpoint, negative emotion concerned anger ("angry", "frustrate", "annoy", and "mad") and more general negative feelings ("upset"), but the partner-viewpoint also included sadness ("disappoint"). Another notable difference between the negative emotion words based on viewpoint was that the word "angry" was ranked second for the self-viewpoint, while the word "disappoint" was ranked second for the partner-viewpoint. Such patterns are consistent with past research, as anger is more often linked to descriptions of self as a victim of harm (self-viewpoint) than the perpetrator of harm (partner-viewpoint; Kaplar & Gordon, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005).

With regard to support functions, there were seven words that fit into this theme, ranging from "talk", mentioned by more than half of couple members, to "together", voiced by slightly less than half of the participants. Similar to the self-viewpoint, the words clustered around the categories of companionship ("meet", "hang", and "together"), intimacy ("talk," "see," and "understand"), and nurturance ("give"). One key difference between the support function words based on viewpoint was that the word "see" was ranked first for the self-viewpoint, while the word "talk" was ranked first for the partner-viewpoint. This suggests that couple members describe more discussion, whether good or bad, when taking the viewpoint of their partner, that is when they are the source of relationship problems. Such findings are consistent with previous literature, which suggests that when the narrator takes the viewpoint of the perpetrator when compared to the victim, they will be more willing to consider or understand the thoughts and feelings of the other person (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005).

Table 1

The Top 30 Most Frequently Used Words by Viewpoint

Rank	Self	Frequency (n)	% in Texts		Partner	Frequency (n)	% in Texts
1	See	313	76.92	1	Upset	333	74.04
2	Happen	288	72.12	2	Work	227	68.27
3	Talk	452	70.19	3	Talk	290	66.35
4	Upset	395	70.19	4	Right	166	64.42
5	Friend	463	67.31	5	See	210	63.46
6	Work	233	65.38	6	Told	135	61.54
7	Thought	152	61.54	7	Thought	152	60.58
8	End	161	59.62	8	Point	122	57.69
9	Point	149	56.73	9	Understand	136	56.73
10	Understand	151	51.92	10	Friend	312	53.85
11	Told	133	50.96	11	Meet	118	52.88
12	Together	120	50.00	12	End	146	50.96
13	Fine	135	49.04	13	Give	91	50.96
14	Relationship	179	47.12	14	Situation	138	50.00
15	Hang	155	47.12	15	Hang	166	48.08
16	Angry	150	47.12	16	Together	96	45.19
17	Deal	108	47.12	17	Relationship	119	43.27
18	Sure	102	47.12	18	Deal	90	43.27
19	Better	104	46.15	19	Disappoint	142	42.31
20	Mad	152	43.27	20	Fine	85	42.31
21	Annoy	164	42.31	21	Realize	112	41.35
22	Nothing	83	42.31	22	Angry	105	41.35
23	Mind	79	42.31	23	Sure	90	41.35
24	Mean	102	41.35	24	Frustrate	133	40.38
25	Look	93	41.35	25	Better	89	40.38
26	Frustrate	155	40.38	26	Annoy	128	39.42
27	Realize	103	40.38	27	Happy	86	39.42
28	Situation	102	40.38	28	Look	89	36.54
29	Meet	86	40.38	29	Mad	138	34.62
30	Give	99	39.42	30	Mean	73	34.62

Table 2

Fitting the Top 30 Most Frequently Used Words to Common Romantic Relationship Themes from Previous Research by Viewpoint

	Negative Emotions		Support Functions	
	Word	% Used	Word	% Used
Self	Upset	70.19	See	76.92
	Angry	47.12	Talk	70.19
	Mad	43.27	Understand	51.92
	Annoy	42.31	Together	50.00
	Frustrate	40.38	Hang	47.12
			Meet	40.38
			Give	39.42
Partner	Upset	74.04	Talk	66.35
	Disappoint	42.31	See	63.46
	Angry	41.35	Understand	56.73
	Frustrate	40.38	Meet	52.88
	Annoy	39.42	Give	50.96
	Mad	34.62	Hang	48.08
			Together	45.19

THEME EXTRACTION THROUGH FACTOR ANALYSIS ON SELF- AND PARTNER-NARRATIVES
Although sorting the words found by the MEH software into predetermined themes from previous literature was interesting, the major aim of this study was to use factor analyses in order to determine which words were clustering together to form themes from the speaker rather than the researcher's viewpoint (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008). In order to extract statistically significant common themes related to conflict from the self-viewpoint portion of the narrative, we performed a factor analysis using varimax rotation on the binary word scores of the top ranked 30 words. The factors were required to reach an Eigen value of at least 1.5, account for 5% or more of the variance, and be interpretable. Also, the words could only be attributed to one factor, loading at .35 or higher on this factor with a difference of at least .15 in factor loading between the assigned factor and other factors. The results of the diagnostic Bartlett's Sphericity Test (df[435] = 644.10, p < .001) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO = .58) showed that a factor-analysis model was suitable for our data. The four factor solution was determined to be the most interpretable for the self-viewpoint (32.18% of the variance), fitting the data well based on an Eigen value criterion of 1.7 or higher for each factor (60% of the words loaded into a factor based on the set criteria). Table 3 shows the factor loadings for the top 30 self-viewpoint words that loaded onto the four factors. Factor 1 was related to the partner having difficulty recognizing that there was a problem and accounted for 14.36% of the variance. The words in this factor were concerned with being upset because the partner was unable to realize that there was a specific relationship problem. Factor 2 dealt with thoughts about how a conflict situation turned out and accounted for 6.16% of the variance. These words were related to not being sure about how a situation

ended up, and thinking through the uncertainty of the situation. Factor 3 reflected the theme about insufficient companionship, accounting for 6.02% of the variance. The words in this factor involved being mad when partners spent too much time with their friends. Factor 4 tapped into angry negative emotions and accounted for 5.64% of the variance. These words were related to frustration or annoyance when conflict happened.

Comparable factor analyses were performed on the partner-viewpoint top 30 binary word scores. The four factor solution fit the data best (32.58% of the variance), with 76.67% of the words loading on one of the four factors. The results of the diagnostic Bartlett's Sphericity Test (df[435] = 655.65, $p < .001$) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO = .59) showed that a factor-analysis model was suitable for our data. Table 4 shows the factor loadings for the top 30 partner-viewpoint words that loaded onto the four factors. Factor 1 dealt with negative emotion in relation to speaking about a problem and accounted for 14.17% of the variance. The words in this factor were concerned with being mean or getting frustrated when talking about an issue in the relationship. Factor 2 was related to thinking about and dealing with a specific problem and accounted for 6.97% of the variance. The words in this factor involved examining and thinking about a situation, and then working through the issues. Factor 3 reflected concerns about insufficient companionship and the reasons for it; this factor accounted for 5.93% of the variance. Factor 4 tapped into different aspects of negative emotion, accounting for 5.51% of the variance. The words for this factor were related to unhappiness and disappointment when conflict occurred in the relationship.

Using MEM, we identified similarities and differences in factor themes and their defining words depending on viewpoint. With regard to Factor 1, both self- and partner-viewpoints involved of discussing the problem. However, for the self-viewpoint it was the inability to recognize a problem, whereas for the partner-viewpoint it was the presence of negative emotions when discussing the problem. In terms of Factor 2, the two viewpoints were similar in that they dealt with thinking about a problem, but for the self-viewpoint it was reflecting back about how the events turned out, while for the partner-viewpoint it was talking about and dealing with a current problem. More specifically, as anticipated, the partner-viewpoint emphasized further understanding about and working through the relationship conflict. This is consistent with research showing that adopting the viewpoint of the perpetrator, when compared to that of the victim, is more greatly associated with attempting to understand the other person (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005). Overall, the first two factor for self- and partner-viewpoints revealed how MEM uses language patterns to reveal subjective construals that tap into themes that are less prevalent in past research (Stanton, Boyd, Pulverman, & Meston, 2015; Chung & Pennebaker, 2008).

In contrast to the first two factors, for both viewpoints the third and fourth factors matched previously identified themes of companionship and negative emotions, respectively. The third factor was related to the issue of how much time a couple member spends with friends versus the partner. In terms of the words used, the self-viewpoint was negatively charged, while the partner-viewpoint dealt with a misunderstanding of the problem. With regard to the self-viewpoint, our results are consistent with previous literature which demonstrates that negative emotion is more strongly linked to narrating from the view of the victim when compared to taking the view of the perpetrator. Similarly, the partner-viewpoint was consistent with past research that has found a stronger connection between the attempt to understand the other person, and adopting a perpetrator, versus victim, point of view (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005). With regard to self- and partner-viewpoints, the fourth factor was related to negative feelings that arise during conflict with a partner, a common theme in the literature (Crane & Testa, 2014; Simon & Furman, 2010; Sanford, 2007). For the self-viewpoint, the words focused on anger, whereas the words for the partner-viewpoint were linked to feelings of anger and sadness. The self-viewpoint is consistent with evidence from past literature, which finds that narrating from the victim compared to the perpetrator point of view is linked to greater levels of negative emotion, specifically anger. For the partner-viewpoint, the results were also consistent with previous research in which more anger and sadness, with regard to remorse, is more likely to be associated with the perpetrator than the victim viewpoint (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005).

Table 3

Factor Analysis Results for the Self-Unmet Need Viewpoint (values in the table are factor loadings)

Word	Factor 1: Difficulty Recognizing the Problem	Factor 2: Thinking About How the Event Turned Out	Factor 3: Insufficient Companionship	Factor 4: Negative Emotion
Give	.67			
Realize	.56			
Point	.50			
Relationship	.49			
Mean	.43			
Upset	.42			
Look	.41			
End		.59		
Sure		.57		
Mind		.50		
Situation		.50		
Friend			.58	
Deal			.48	
Hang			.46	
Mad			.46	
Frustrate				.65
Happen				.56
Annoy				.47

Table 4

Factor Analysis Results for the Romantic Partner-Unmet Need Viewpoint (values in the table are factor loadings)

Word	Factor 1: Negative Emotion When Talking	Factor 2: Thinking About and Dealing with the Problem	Factor 3: Insufficient Companionship	Factor 4: Negative Emotion
Mean	.57			
Frustrate	.56			
Annoy	.50			
Talk	.47			
Point	.47			
Fine	.40			
Look		.60		
Thought		.56		
End		.48		
Realize		.46		
Work		.43		
Deal		.42		
Right		.41		
Upset		.38		
Hang		.37		
See			.63	
Understand			.63	
Meet			.58	
Sure			.47	
Friend			.46	
Happy (Not)				.70
Angry				.64
Disappoint				.41

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations that should be addressed with regard to this study. First, in terms of the two factor analyses, our small sample size made the findings less reliable and more likely to change with the use of a different sample. With a sample size of 104 couple members and 30 words, we had less than 4 participants for each word in the factor analyses which is below the recommendation of at least 10 participants per variable (in this case word). Other studies involving MEM, although not using couples, have used more words due to their larger sample sizes. When the MEM was used to study 1165 open-ended narratives on the personalities of college students, 88 adjectives were used, amounting to roughly 13 participants per variable (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008). Similarly, when the MEM was applied to Facebook status updates in order to examine themes of self-expression, 1,765,824 users were examined through 760 separate word categories, resulting in 2,323 participants per variable (Kramer & Chung,

2011). Thus, a larger sample size would not only make our results more reliable and allow us to use more words, but we could also find other, or possibly different, themes, such as power and blame. Second, there may be an issue with generalizing our findings to a larger and more diverse group of emerging adults. Since 74% of the participants were White, and all were heterosexual, it is possible that this sample is not representative of romantic conflict as it would be described by couple members who are homosexual or of other races. Third, because words needed to be defined with regard to context in order to be interpretable within a given theme, it is possible that incorrect assumptions or definitions were made of certain words. A future follow-up study may consider increasing the number of n-grams to two or three in order to assist with some context. Finally, as this was an exploratory study, we did not take the next step to look at scores for individual couples, nor did we examine how themes were related to the romantic relationship functioning of each couple member. Such work would allow for understanding themes that characterize couples and how such themes are related to couple behavior. Yet, despite these limitations, this study adds to the body of past research using the MEM in that it is the first to apply it to romantic conflict during emerging adulthood. Common themes were evident from both a self- and partner-viewpoint, some of which have not been studied as in depth in previous research. These findings suggest that future work can be done using the MEM to more clearly understand romantic conflict depending on viewpoint.

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