NEGATIVE EMOTION AND BREAKUP ANXIETY IN ROMANTIC CONFLICT NARRATIVES: LINKS TO VERBAL AGGRESSION

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a crucial time for the development of romantic relationships. During this period, compared to adolescence, the salience of these relationships is indicated by higher rates of relationship involvement, sexual activity, and cohabitation (Davila et al., 2017). Emerging adult romantic relationships become more intimate and longer-lasting, as well as more supportive, interdependent, and serious (Collibee & Furman, 2015). However, they are also characterized by greater conflict (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001; Simon, Kobielski, & Martin, 2008). It is important to investigate how couples resolve conflict during this period because emerging adult compared to adolescent relationship quality is more strongly associated with adjustment and dating satisfaction. Poorer quality relationships are related to depression and anxiety, as well as poorer couple functioning (Collibee & Furman, 2015).

Conflict resolution skills developed during emerging adulthood are thought to contribute to healthier committed future relationships, such as marriage (Bae & Wickrama, 2018; Furman & Collibee, 2018; Masarik et al., 2013). Considerable research shows that conflict beliefs, attributions, and resolution skills are crucial to understanding couple satisfaction and relationship quality (e.g., Crane & Testa, 2014; Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011; Simon et al., 2008). There are numerous education and intervention programs that facilitate the development of better conflict resolution skills for older and married couples; however, there are almost no previous studies focused on improving conflict resolution skills in emerging adults (Davila et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to deepen our understanding of how negative emotion regulation in emerging adult couple members' narratives about conflict events was related to their use of verbal aggression in dealing with conflict.

Emotion regulation is a key competency that is necessary for handling conflicts in romantic relationships. Greater emotion regulation skills are associated with fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, greater relationship satisfaction, and healthier decision-making in emerging adults (Davila et al., 2017). We used the relational approach to defining emotion regulation (Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011), in which emotion regulation involves the process of negotiating or coordinating one couple member's goals and strivings with their romantic partner's. For example, couple members who are able to calm down and have a difficult conversation after an argument demonstrate emotion regulation. Furthermore, interpersonal emotion regulation involves how couple member actions are guided by their emotional interpretations of romantic conflict. To examine how couple members ascribe emotional significance to events, we used narratives. Narratives are a central mechanism through which people make meaning of negative events (Pasupathi, Wainryb, Mansfield, & Bourne, 2017; Wainryb, Pasupathi, Bourne, & Oldroyd, 2018). By tapping into adaptations to the reconstructed past, narratives are important for understanding negative emotion and its management (Campos et al., 2011). However, there is limited work that examines emotion regulation in couples using narratives.

To gain a more complete understanding of how negative emotions are expressed and regulated when couple members recount past conflict events, we used a multi-method approach (Feiring, Milaniak, Simon, & Clisura, 2017). This approach allowed us to assess different aspects of emotion regulation within narratives about romantic relationship conflict. We considered multiple indicators of negative emotions related to conflict narratives that were used in previous research to understand emotion

regulation. These included angry and sad words and angry and sad ratings. In our study, angry and sad words were used to assess how couple members interpreted recollected romantic conflict. Emotion words give us insight into how couple members assess events involving angry and sad feelings (Feiring et al., 2017). Angry and sad ratings were used as an indicator of the magnitude of couple members' emotional experiences (Sanford, 2007a).

While angry and sad ratings have been widely used in couples research, not many studies have investigated angry and sad words as indicators of emotion regulation within romantic conflict narratives. Other gaps in the literature include limited research on the use of narratives in couples' conflict, as well as examination of romantic conflict with both partners (rather than just one partner). To address these gaps, we examined two research questions. The first question concerned the extent to which negative emotion was related to the use of aggressive conflict strategies, specifically verbal aggression. Research suggests that emotion regulatory processes are associated with conflict management. For example, daily anger within couple members was associated with corresponding increases in daily conflict reports and aggression (Crane & Testa, 2014). The second research question involved the nature of conflict events and whether events that might be perceived as threatening to the relationship would provide a more complete understanding of the context during which negative emotions are used to interpret conflict. Accordingly, we focused on breakup anxiety, that is, whether conflict events were seen as possibly leading to the end of the relationship. We asked whether breakup anxiety in addition to negative emotion might enhance understanding of the tendency to use verbal aggression in dealing with conflict. Previous research demonstrated that breakup anxiety was related to the use of less constructive strategies during relationship conflict and overall poorer relationship outcomes (Feiring, Simon, & Markus, 2018).

NEGATIVE EMOTION AND VERBAL AGGRESSION

The first aim of this study was to examine how anger and sadness related to narratives about specific conflict events was associated with couple members' use of verbal aggression. We based our study on the theoretical perspective that the expression of emotion itself is regulatory. As couple members discuss a previous conflict event, they are simultaneously interpreting their emotions about the event and portraying this interpretation as a meaningful outward expression. When couple members recall times when their partners did not meet their needs, they use emotion to indicate the significance of the events and as such engage in emotion regulatory processes as they make sense of the conflict and its importance for the relationship (Campos et al., 2011; Davila et al., 2017). Relational emotion regulation between couple members serves to manage conflicting goals by relinquishing, modifying, or persevering with these goals in order to reach a negotiated outcome. This takes place during face-to-face couple interactions, but it can also operate when couple members consider and interpret past conflict events. Narrative recollections of conflict events tap into negative emotion and give us a means to understand emotion regulation within couple members as they recall times when their needs were not met (Davila et al., 2017).

Anger and sadness are particularly salient during relationship conflict. They are the most commonly studied negative emotions and are related to the use of conflict strategies (e.g., Crane & Testa, 2014; Feiring et al., 2017; Sanford, 2007b). Anger is often elicited when individuals are confronted with an obstacle to their goals, and involves blaming another person for behavior that is perceived as both intentional and harmful (Fischer & Evers, 2011). It is associated with aggressive behaviors, such as hitting and criticizing, with the goal of coercing or hurting others (Roseman, 1994). Previous research showed that anger was strongly associated with negative communication, such as blame, criticism, threats, invalidation, and demeaning statements, as well as detrimental changes in communication within married couples (Sanford, 2007b). Anger was also related to greater aggression between couple members during conflict events (Crane & Testa, 2014).

In contrast to anger, sadness is often experienced as a response to a goal lost or not attained (Barr-Zisowitz, 2000). Sadness may represent hopelessness, a sense of loss, and a perceived threat to the relationship (Sanford & Grace, 2011). Sad couple members may feel that their partners are neglecting them (Sanford & Grace, 2011), which may lead to the use of more negative conflict strategies, such as verbal aggression. Although the association between sadness and negative conflict strategies is not as

strong as that of anger, previous research found that sadness is nonetheless associated with small increases in negative communication, and that couple members tended to use poor communication when their partners habitually expressed sadness (Sanford, 2007b). However, sadness may also indicate vulnerability and the pursuit of relationship-focused goals, which may mitigate the use of negative communication during relationship conflict (Sanford, 2007b). Sad couple members may increase their partners' awareness of the importance, threat, or difficulty of the conflict and may in turn motivate their partners to address the problem using less negative conflict strategies.

The present study utilized words and ratings to investigate the role of anger and sadness in conflict management within couple members. Language is a primary means through which people interpret information to make sense of their environment (Pasupathi et al., 2017; Shiota & Keltner, 2005; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Emotion words can convey information about internal states, attitudes, beliefs, and social contexts, and provide important psychological cues to people's thought processes, emotional states, intentions, and motivations. When used in narratives, emotion words give us insight into couple members' thoughts and feelings about, as well as interpretations of past conflict events. Negative emotion words (e.g., annoyed, hurt, crying) are used to describe negative events in order to convey emotions such as anger or sadness (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Using angry or sad words to interpret emotionally difficult situations may promote greater understanding of previous conflicts or serve to heighten a sense of distress (Campos et al., 2004; Shiota & Keltner, 2005). Although studies have suggested that the use of negative emotion words in narratives is related to regulatory behavior, there is a remarkable lack of research on how angry and sad words in couple member narratives are related to the use of verbal aggression.

In contrast to emotion words, ratings are commonly used to tap negative emotion in couples research. We utilized angry and sad ratings in our study to tap the perceived magnitude of emotional experiences immediately following the recollection of relationship conflict. Sanford (2007a) used ratings to tap into anger and sadness during a series of romantic conflict conversations. Based on self-report and observer ratings, anger was associated with more aggression, whereas sadness was associated with less aggression. Furthermore, Crane & Testa (2014) used self-report ratings on aggressive conflict tactics, aggressivity, and daily affective experience to investigate the effects of anger on intimate-partner aggression. They found that both actor and partner anger were generally associated with subsequently reported daily conflict and aggression. In a dyadic behavioral observation study, the experiences and consequences of hurt feelings (an emotion similar to sadness) and anger were assessed through rating scales (Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2012). Couple members told their partners ways that they would like them to change and were referred to as the "perpetrators" of their partners' hurt and angry feelings, while the partners who experienced hurt and anger as a result of being asked to change were the "victims". Victims' anger predicted decreases in their own constructive behavior and increases in their own and the perpetrators' destructive behavior. Victims' hurt predicted increases in the perpetrators' constructive reactions. Overall, these findings demonstrate the utility of ratings to tap anger and sadness related to conflict strategies.

Regarding the associations between negative emotion and conflict strategies, there is previous literature linking anger with aggression, which was the basis for our expectation that angry words and ratings would be associated with more verbal aggression. For sadness, the findings are less consistent and more complex. Some studies showed that sadness was associated with more negative communication and perceived partner neglect (Sanford, 2007b; Sanford & Grace, 2011), leading us to predict that sadness would be associated with more verbal aggression. However, sad words and ratings may also be related to less negative communication (Sanford, 2007b; Sanford & Grace, 2011), leading us to entertain an alternative hypothesis such that sad words and ratings would be associated with less verbal aggression. As our study was grounded in the interdependent nature of couple functioning, we considered how couple member anger and sadness were related to their own (actor effect), as well as their partners' (partner effect) use of verbal aggression (Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; Bernstein, Laurent, Nelson, & Laurent, 2015; Cook & Kenny, 2005). We expected the predictions for associations between

negative emotion and verbal aggression to hold true for both actor and partner effects such that couple members' own emotion would be related to their own and their partner's use of verbal aggression.

BREAKUP ANXIETY AND VERBAL AGGRESSION

Conflict can be interpreted as challenging or threatening to a relationship. Whereas challenge is viewed as typically less negative in valence and associated with more constructive responses, threat is characterized as strongly negative and is associated with maladaptive coping behaviors (McCrae, 1984; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Furthermore, challenging events are viewed as more controllable and less harmful, whereas threatening events are anticipated to be less controllable and more likely to result in considerable harm. We defined breakup anxiety as interpretations of conflict events that indicated that such events might threaten to end the relationship (Feiring et al., 2018).

The potentially threatening nature of breakup anxiety may help us better understand the use of conflict strategies in response to romantic conflict events. As romantic relationships become more meaningful during emerging adulthood, breakups are related to greater distress and negative mental health outcomes, such as depression (Cameron, Palm, & Follette, 2010; Peterson, Rosenbaum, & Conn, 1985). We reasoned that the anticipation of such a distressing event would likely be related to stress and maladaptive conflict strategies. Research is scarce on breakup anxiety and conflict management in non-treatment seeking emerging adult couples. Nevertheless, couples often seek intervention when conflict becomes severe enough to make them worried the relationship will end (Gottman & Notarius, 2002; McCormick, Hsueh, Merrilees, Chou, & Cummings, 2017; Traupman, Smith, Florsheim, Berg, & Uchino, 2011). Exploring the associations between breakup anxiety and verbal aggression was expected to provide useful insight for couples' intervention.

Although conflict is typically viewed as negative, beliefs about whether conflict can improve or harm a romantic relationship may vary (Simon et al., 2008). Disagreements between partners may strengthen bonds and enhance mutual understanding, but conflict may also precipitate relationship difficulties and lead to physical or emotional abuse. Destructive beliefs about conflict are associated with more destructive conflict behaviors, such as aggression, and more conflictual relationships (Furman & Simon, 2006; Simon et al., 2008). Constructive beliefs about conflict are related to the use of negotiation and compromise, as well as greater intimacy. Breakup anxiety is more likely to be related to a destructive perspective of conflict, and as such be framed as a threat rather than a challenge to the romantic relationship. A study that examined constructive and destructive narrative interpretations of romantic conflict within emerging adult couples found that breakup anxiety was related to destructive beliefs that conflicts are hurtful and may end the relationship (Feiring et al., 2018). The same study also found that conflicts exhibiting greater breakup anxiety were related to more anger and aggression. Based on limited research, we predicted that breakup anxiety would be associated with the use of more verbal aggression, and that it would contribute to predicting the use of verbal aggression in addition to negative emotion.

METHODS

Participants

104 heterosexual couples (208 couple members) between the ages of 18 and 25 (M= 19.70, SD= 1.13) were recruited through an online sampling pool of students enrolled in psychology courses at a mid-size, liberal arts college in New Jersey. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be in an exclusive romantic relationship of three months or longer (M= 15.82, SD= 12.91), have face-to-face contact with their partner (no strictly online relationships), and attend the same college. The ethnic composition of the sample was similar to that of the college student population at the sponsoring institution: 68.3% participants were White, 17.8% Hispanic, 3.4% African American, 5.8% Asian American, 4.8% Other. Couple members reported first meeting as friends (24.0%), as acquaintances (19.7%), through friends (21.2%), and as strangers (35.1%).

Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. After obtaining informed consent, the study was completed in two sections—first a face-to-face interview followed by survey measures. The interview was semi-structured and audio-recorded. The first part of the interview asked participants for two examples of times when their partners met their needs, followed by two examples of times when their partners did not meet their needs. The second part of the interview asked participants for two examples of times when they met their partner's needs, followed by two examples of times when they did not meet their partner's needs. For the purposes of the present study, we focused on the two examples about the speaker's unmet needs. After the face-to-face interview, participants completed a Qualtrics survey about the same romantic relationship that included measures of relationship functioning. Among these measures were items that assessed verbal aggression as well as demographic information, such as ethnicity. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed, asked for feedback, and given a resource sheet detailing services available for students with romantic relationship issues. Participants were thanked for their time and compensated with educational credits or $8 for each hour of participation.

Measures
Semi-Structured Interview. The interviewers were undergraduates who had been trained for a minimum of 20 hours by the lab director (Dr. Feiring) to conduct the interviews. These peer interviewers were unknown to the participants. All female participants were interviewed by women whereas male participants were interviewed by both women (66.7%) and men (33.3%). For this study, we focused on the two examples regarding self-unmet needs. These sections of the interview consisted of five questions for each example: (1) a specific example of an unmet need; (2) a walk-through of the specific example of the unmet need; (3) how the couple member felt about the unmet need (4) other reactions the couple member experienced to the unmet need; and (5) how the couple member believed their partner felt about the unmet need. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and averaged 50.59 minutes (*SD*= 20.90). For confidentiality purposes, all names, places, and identifying information were de-identified in the transcripts.

Word Count Measures of Anger and Sadness. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software was used to obtain measures of anger and sadness in the narrative examples of self-unmet needs. Word count analysis is an effective way to measure event-specific representations as the words people use to communicate their internal construal of events to others (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). In support of this assumption, previous research found consistent links between the LIWC word count categories and social and psychological variables such as relationship quality, social rank, and deception (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). To prepare the narratives for analysis, which came from spoken rather than written narratives, we removed the interviewer text and edited the transcripts to create a narrative for each couple member containing the self-unmet needs. Words that were indicative of nonfluencies (a break or irregularity in speech) or fillers (meaningless words or phrases) in participant speech were marked using the rules provided in the LIWC manual (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015). These edited narratives were run through the LIWC software, in order to identify the use of angry and sad words by each couple member when describing their own emotional responses to their unmet needs. The corpus of angry and sad words used to identify emotion words was guided by past work on words that convey anger and sadness (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Feiring et al., 2017; Lazarus, 1991). Angry emotion words included feelings of anger and other negative emotions associated with asserting power and control (e.g., pissed off, irritated, heated, mad). Sad emotion words included feelings of sadness, hurt, and other negative emotions associated with vulnerability (e.g., disappointed, depressed, down). When a narrative was run through the LIWC software, angry and sad words from the corpus were highlighted in the text. The narrative was then manually reviewed by the authors who counted the number of angry and sad words that specifically described the speakers' own feelings (unlike the typical LIWC software that counts all words regardless of to whom or to what context they apply). These words were then summed separately for each emotion type, with higher scores indicating the greater use of such words.

Breakup Anxiety. Indicators of breakup anxiety were identified in the self-unmet need portions of the narratives. These involved descriptions of conflict events that showed that the speaker was concerned about the viability of the relationship; for example, thoughts about leaving the partner or events that precipitated a temporary breakup in the past (Feiring et al., 2018). We coded whether both (scored 2), one (scored 1), or none (scored 0) of the two stories about unmet needs contained breakup anxiety. Careful review of a past corpus of over 145 narratives indicated that breakup anxiety was a salient aspect in some narratives and was best indexed by its presence or absence in each unmet need story (Feiring et al., 2018). Breakup anxiety was coded by Dr. Feiring who trained additional coders to establish inter-rater reliability. The narratives were coded by at least two coders, and when disagreements occurred, they were resolved by consensus. Inter-rater reliability on 32 narratives was acceptable (intraclass correlations, random, absolute method = .72).

Anger and Sadness Ratings. The Couples Emotion Rating Form (CERF; Sanford, 2007a) was used to assess negative emotions related to unmet needs. These ratings were collected after each couple member talked about their two self-unmet needs in the interview. Items tapping angry emotions included being angry, annoyed, irritated, and aggravated. Sadness was indicated by reports of feeling hurt, sad, concerned, and disappointed. A 6-point Likert scale was used to assess whether couple members agreed or disagreed with feeling a particular emotion, from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 6 = "strongly agree". Mean scores were calculated for anger and sadness items, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with feeling each emotion (anger α = .87 and sadness α = .79).

Verbal Aggression. The conflict engagement subscale of the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994) was used to assess verbal aggression during conflicts with romantic partners. It was measured with four items rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Almost Always". Items included "Launching personal attacks" and "Throwing insults and digs". Total scores were summed with higher scores indicating more frequent perpetration of verbal aggression (α = .83).

RESULTS

Emerging We examined whether negative emotion as well as breakup anxiety explained couple members' use of verbal aggression. We used the Actor-Partner-Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999) because it allowed us to examine the effect of couple members' own predictor variables on their own outcomes (actor effect), and of partners' predictor variables on self's outcomes (partner effect). We used structural equation modeling (SEM; MPlus, Muthén, & Muthén, 1998–2010) version 7, to examine the associations between negative emotion, breakup anxiety, and verbal aggression.

We ran models with each emotion variable and breakup anxiety as the predictors, and verbal aggression as the outcome. These models constrained actor and partner effects to be the same across men and women because patterns of correlations were similar for female and male partners. The equality constraint assumption that actor and partner effects would be the same by gender was supported by the results as chi-squared tests showed that the models fit the data well. Table 1 shows the standardized estimates and fit statistics for each model. In the SEM approach, the unstandardized coefficients are exactly the same for the female and male partners. However, even with equality constraints, the standardized coefficients can be slightly different for female and male partners because separate standard deviations by gender are used to calculate the standardized coefficients.

Table 1
APIM Results for Negative Emotion Measures and Breakup Anxiety to Predict Verbal Aggression (Standardized Estimates and Fit Statistics for Models that Constrained Actor and Partner Effects)

	Actor Effects		Partner Effects		Fit Statistics
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Angry	.16*	.15*	.04	.04	χ^2 (4) = 5.09, p

Words					= .28	CFI = .94
Breakup Anxiety	.17*	.15*	.12*	.16*		
Angry (Ratings)	.34**	.37**	.08	.07	= .27	$\chi^2 (4) = 5.13$, p
Breakup Anxiety	.11	.09	.11	.14		CFI = .97
Sad Words	.10	.08	.05	.07	= .48	$\chi^2 (4) = 3.51$, p
Breakup Anxiety	.17*	.15*	.10	.13		CFI = 1.00
Sad Ratings	.19**	.22**	-.01	-.01	= .73	$\chi^2 (4) = 2.01$, p
Breakup Anxiety	.11	.10	.12	.16		CFI = 1.00

Note. The table shows the findings from APIM models that constrained actor and partner effects to be equal by couple member gender. Unstandardized coefficients were the same for female and male couple members, but standardized coefficients differed slightly because separate standard deviations by gender were used to calculate standardized coefficients.

Consistent with our predictions, there were some actor effects such that negative emotion and breakup anxiety contributed significantly to verbal aggression. Angry words and breakup anxiety each contributed to the prediction of more verbal aggression. Angry and sad ratings were each related to more verbal aggression, but in these models, breakup anxiety did not add to what was explained by the emotion variable. Sad words were not associated with verbal aggression, but breakup anxiety did predict the use of more aggression in this model. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find any significant partner effects for negative emotion on verbal aggression. However, in the model for angry words, there was a significant partner effect of breakup anxiety such that the partner's breakup anxiety predicted the self's use of more verbal aggression.

DISCUSSION

Seeking to address the scarcity of literature on negative interpretations of events in narratives about romantic conflict, we investigated the extent to which negative emotion was related to the use of verbal aggression during narratives about romantic conflict. We also examined the extent to which breakup anxiety contributed to the use of verbal aggression in addition to negative emotion. Consistent with our hypotheses, there were actor effects such that both negative emotion and breakup anxiety were associated with verbal aggression. We did not find expected partner effects for negative emotion and verbal aggression. However, partner's breakup anxiety was associated with couple member verbal aggression in the model that included angry words.

Negative Emotion and Verbal Aggression

A substantial corpus of couples' research shows that anger is related to destructive relationship behaviors (Crane & Testa, 2014; Lemay et al., 2012; Roseman, 1994; Sanford, 2007b). We anticipated that angry words and ratings would be associated with more verbal aggression. Consistent with past work and our predictions, we found that more angry words and ratings were related to more aggression. These findings support prior research characterizing anger as an attack emotion that provokes aggressive behavior with the intention to hurt or coerce others (Roseman, 1994). Within couples, anger has been associated with intimate partner aggression (Crane & Testa, 2014) and negative communication strategies (Baron et al., 2007; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Roberts, 2000; Sanford, 2007b). However, most research assesses anger during conflict interactions or diary reports and relates it to subsequent behavior. The current

study deepens our understanding of the association between anger and verbal aggression by providing a novel perspective on emotion regulation through the use of couple conflict narratives.

Using anger to interpret past events was related to the use of destructive conflict strategies, which suggests that some couple members may get caught up in anger about previous conflict events in ways that become ruminative. Rumination about anger is a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on angry emotions and thoughts (Denson, 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). It is associated with greater relational aggression within emerging adult romantic relationships as well as impaired downregulation of negative emotion during negative relationship events (Goldstein, 2011; Jostmann, Karremans, & Finkenauer, 2011). Most studies assess rumination using rating scales, such as the Relational Rumination Questionnaire (Senkans, McEwan, Skues, & Ogloff, 2016). Narratives might provide insight into how the use of rumination about conflict events might predispose couple members to use more destructive conflict strategies in future interactions. Angry rumination may be evident in narratives where the speaker perseverates on angry emotion and is perhaps unable to gain some distance from the negative aspects of conflict events (Pasupathi et al., 2017). Such rumination might serve to heighten distress, which in turn could lead to escalated negative emotions and the related use of aggressive strategies in future interactions around similar conflict issues.

Consistent with our prediction that sadness is linked to more negative conflict strategies, we found that higher sad ratings were associated with more verbal aggression. This result suggests that sadness primarily functioned as a more destructive emotion for the couples in our study. Sadness may be associated with hurtful events such as betrayal or rejection, which could motivate the use of negative strategies such as verbal aggression (Sanford 2007b). This is consistent with our findings that sad words were related to aggression in the model that included break-up anxiety, which encompasses interpretations of betrayal. Previous research revealed that youth who had difficulty coping with sadness were more likely to engage in relational aggression (Sullivan, Helms, Kliewer, & Goodman, 2010). We did not find support for our alternative prediction that sadness would be related to less aggression. Sanford (2007b) found that soft emotions, such as sadness, were not associated with more conflict resolution in a sample of college students, as compared to a sample of married couples. As such, the function of sadness in couple conflict may depend on the level of intimacy and closeness in a relationship. For couples that are not as intimate or have not been together as long, sadness expressed by one couple member might create tension and distance instead of encouraging communication and signifying a desire to resolve conflict.

Breakup Anxiety and Verbal Aggression
In our study, we framed breakup anxiety as an indicator of threat to the relationship. We anticipated that breakup anxiety would uniquely contribute to the use of verbal aggression in addition to negative emotion regulation with both actor and partner effects. Consistent with our predictions, we found actor effects such that breakup anxiety was associated with the use of more verbal aggression within the models for angry and sad words. This is consistent with previous work on romantic conflict narratives which found that breakup anxiety was associated with anger and the perpetration of aggression for individuals in romantic relationships (Feiring et al., 2018). Extending this past work with individuals to couples, we found that breakup anxiety showed partner effects, such that it explained variance in the use of verbal aggression within the model for angry words. It is notable that breakup anxiety in both oneself and one's partner exacerbated the tendency to use verbal aggression, whereas negative emotion only showed associations between oneself and one's own use of verbal aggression. This suggests that breakup anxiety may be more severe and explicitly negative for couple functioning than anger or sadness. Using anger and sadness to interpret romantic conflict events may indicate a problem that is a challenge or a threat. However, using breakup anxiety to interpret romantic conflict events may indicate a problem that is fundamentally threatening to the relationship. In this way, breakup anxiety from either partner may contribute to relying on more aggressive and less effective coping strategies (Feiring et al., 2018; Furman & Simon, 2006; Simon et al., 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results of this study. Future studies should use samples that are more diverse in race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, as our couples were predominantly white and entirely heterosexual. Our one-time assessment of verbal aggression where participants are asked to recollect behavior in the past several months tends to underestimate its occurrence compared to cumulative assessments where participants are asked to report their behavior every two weeks (Jouriles, McDonald, Garrido, Rosenfield, & Brown, 2005). The cross-sectional design of the current study precluded us from establishing temporal precedence between negative emotion and breakup anxiety and the use of verbal aggression. Future longitudinal research can shed light on how meaning making around negative emotion and breakup anxiety guides future relationship functioning.

Clinical Implications

Our findings suggest that issues surrounding negative emotion and breakup anxiety in romantic relationships may potentially promote destructive approaches to relationship conflict. The recollection of past conflict events assessed through angry and sad words and ratings as well as breakup anxiety may contribute to specific communication deficits, including harsh start-ups (i.e., raising issues forcefully, escalating rapidly from neutral to negative affect) and flooding (i.e., the tendency to become overwhelmed, leave the argument), which are destructive ways of handling couple conflict (Rueda, Yndo, Williams, & Shorey, 2018). Being able to address negative interpretations of conflict events and regulate the intensity of conflict-related negative emotions may be a necessary first step before couple members can begin to approach conflict constructively. Narratives are one means to understand how each couple member interprets specific conflict events that they deem as problematic. Viewing conflicts from the victim role is related to more negative interpretations of the partner, such as blame and feelings of justifiable anger (Feiring, Markus, & Simon, 2018; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). By asking couple members to separately narrate conflict events important to each of them, treatment providers can get a window into destructive interpretations in order to facilitate empathetic perspective-taking. Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples (EFT), with its emphasis on negative communication patterns, may help couple members come to terms with theirs and their partner's negative emotions about conflict events and become more aware and accepting of conflict experiences (Johnson, 2007; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016).

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