

The Stress Gap: How Fear of Rejection Affects Stress Ratings When Partners Share Pride vs. Shame Stories

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introduction

- Accurately perceiving a partner’s emotions is key to intimacy, understanding, and satisfaction in romantic relationships.
- Even close partners often misread each other’s emotional cues, especially during emotionally vulnerable moments (Ickes, 1997).
- Certain individual traits (e.g., social anxiety) or situational factors (e.g., sharing shame) may increase these misperceptions.
- Shame is particularly difficult to express and interpret due to its strong ties to fear of rejection and social devaluation (Sznycer et al., 2016).
- However, little is known about how rejection sensitivity and the emotional content of disclosures affect the accuracy of emotional perception.

Methods

- The final sample consisted of 110 romantic couples (N = 220; 108 women, 104 men).
- Age: M = 25.7 years (SD = 2.1)
- Relationship length: M = 3.75 years (SD = 2.4)
- Cohabitation: M = 21.6 months (SD = 15.7)
- Married: 16%
- Gap scores: Self-rated tension minus partner-perceived tension for pride and shame disclosures (averaged)
- Rejection sensitivity: Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (ARSQ; Berenson et al., 2009); $\alpha = .73$
- Exclusions: Missing data and outliers ($Z > |3|$)

Discussion

Discussion

- Shame disclosures are harder to interpret accurately, even in close relationships.
- These perception gaps reflect difficulties in expressing and reading socially sensitive emotions.
- Rejection sensitivity did not explain the gap, suggesting the need to explore additional factors.

Implications

- Perception gaps during shame disclosures may hinder effective emotional communication in couples.
- Clinicians and couples may benefit from using structured tools to clarify emotional expressions—especially around shame.

Future Research

- Test whether empathic listening or clarification training reduces perception gaps.
- Examine cultural differences in emotional perception by comparing couples from individualistic and collectivist societies (e.g., Israel vs. Japan).

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1** - disclosers will rate their own tension differently than how Responders perceive their tension during vulnerable sharing.
- Hypothesis 2** - higher rejection sensitivity in responders would be associated with larger perception gaps between the disclosers self-reported tension and the responders perception.
- Hypothesis 3** - shame (vs. pride) would lead to larger perception gaps, especially for responders high in rejection sensitivity.

The content of the shared story (pride vs. shame) will affect the gap, potentially moderated by the Responder’s rejection sensitivity.

Discloser = the partner who shares a personal story
Responder = the partner who listens and rates their partner’s tension
Perception gap = difference between the discloser’s reported tension and the responder’s rating

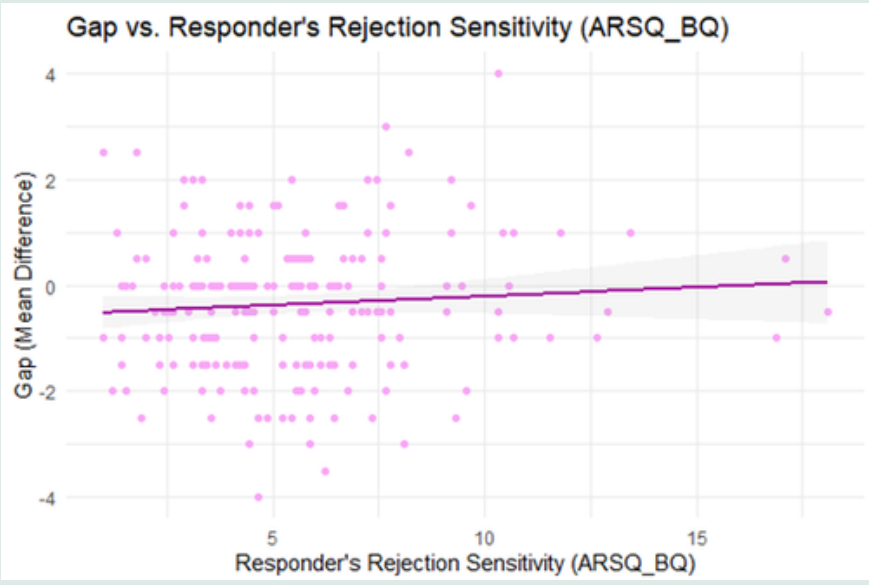
RESULTS

Hypothesis 1



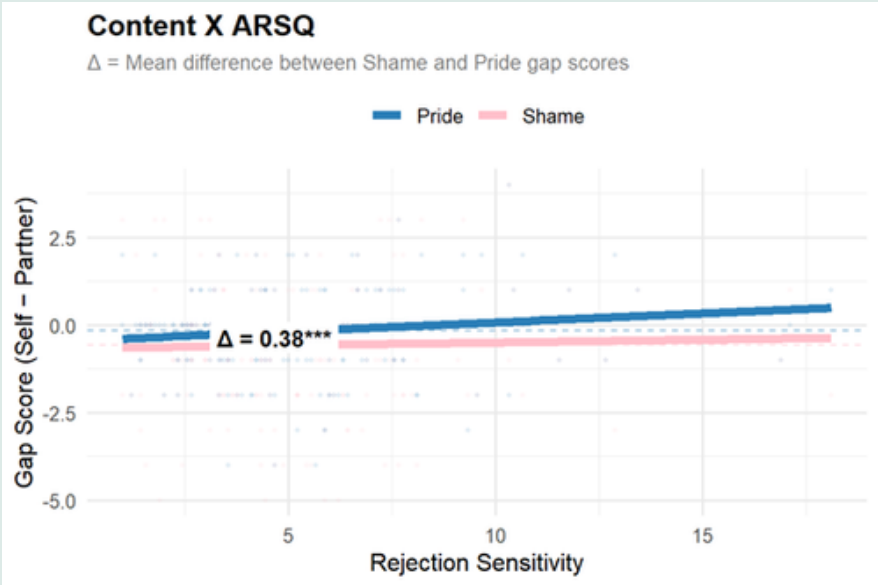
- Disclosers rated themselves as less tense than partners perceived them to be: Gap = -0.38 (SD = 1.28), $t(219) = -5.5, p < .001$

Hypothesis 2



- Rejection Sensitivity Effect:
- The correlation between the gap and rejection sensitivity was not significant ($r = 0.08, p = 0.27$).

Hypothesis 3



- Shame disclosures showed larger gaps than pride disclosures ($M_{diff} = 0.38, p < .001$)
- No rejection sensitivity \times content interaction ($p = .49$)

ARSQ Cronbach's alpha : 0.7342177

vars	n	mean	sd
Tense_P_Dt1	220	1.64	0.96
Tense_S_Dt1	220	2.16	1.22
TensePartner_P_R	220	1.83	1.11
TensePartner_S_R	220	2.73	1.50

References

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