

## Emotion Regulation and Perceptions of Hostile and Constructive Criticism in Romantic Relationships

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Perceptions of hostile criticism (PHC) from close others are associated with poor individual functioning and low relationship satisfaction, whereas perceptions of constructive criticism (PCC) are associated with better relationship satisfaction. There is little empirical knowledge, however, regarding individual factors that contribute to such perceptions. The present study examined associations of overall emotion regulation difficulties, as well as the specific use of expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal, with PHC and PCC. Both partners of 63 community couples completed global self-report measures. Sixty-one couples also completed similar measures immediately following each of three discussions during a laboratory session. Multilevel modeling analyses of global data indicated that individuals' reports of PHC were higher when they used more suppression and when both they and their partners reported greater difficulty in emotion regulation. Results with discussion-specific data were similar: Participants reported higher PHC in discussions when both they and their partners reported using more suppression or when they had more difficulties in emotion regulation during the discussions. Individuals reported higher levels of PCC when

their partners reported using less suppression, both globally and in discussions. Finally, participants also reported higher levels of PCC in discussions when they reported using more reappraisal.

*Keywords:* emotion regulation; perceived criticism; communication; couples

CRITICISM IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED to be negative in the interpersonal realm. It is one of four main negative interpersonal behaviors that predict divorce (Gottman, 1993, 1994). Greater levels of perceived criticism from partners are associated with relationship dissatisfaction in both community couples and couples with a member with anxiety/mood disorders (e.g., Chambless & Blake, 2009; Hooley & Teasdale, 1989). Furthermore, the amount of criticism and hostility expressed by relatives regarding patients has been consistently related to worse treatment outcome and relapse in schizophrenia, mood, and eating disorders (see meta-analysis by Butzlaff & Hooley, 1998). Similarly, perceived criticism from close relatives or romantic partners is a reliable predictor of worse treatment outcome and a worsening of symptoms for several psychological disorders (see review by Masland & Hooley, 2015; Renshaw, 2008). Thus, having a partner who is objectively critical and perceiving a partner as critical are both related to worse individual and relationship functioning.

Despite these findings, some research suggests that the effects of criticism are not so straightforward. First, the manner of delivery and content of criticism appear to be especially important. For example,

Sarah R. Klein is now at the Department of Psychiatry, Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. This research was supported in part by a Creative Awards Grant from George Mason University. Special thanks are given to Sarah Fischer, Ph.D., for her input as part of a dissertation committee. Special thanks are also given to Sarah Hawley, Dustin Seidler, Christopher Wade Williams, April Garber, Kirsten Burke, Bianca Alvarado, Amanda Groner Avenoso, Kate Sullenger, Diana Jafari, and Claire Capeheart for their assistance with data collection, and to Megan Humphreys for assistance with data cleaning.

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when criticism (comments of disagreement with or disapproval of partners' behaviors) and overt hostility (global negative accusations or comments about the partner's attributes) from relatives are examined simultaneously, criticism is predictive of *better* outcomes for individuals undergoing exposure-based therapy for an anxiety disorder, whereas observed hostility is related to poorer treatment outcomes (Chambless & Steketee, 1999; Peter & Hand, 1988; Zinbarg, Lee, & Yoon, 2007). Some authors have thus suggested that nonhostile or constructive criticism from a partner helps people to approach difficult tasks like exposure therapy (e.g., Renshaw, Caska, Rodrigues, & Blais, 2012). Second, findings from multiple studies suggest that perceptions of criticism are either unrelated or only modestly related to objective ratings of criticism (reviews by Masland & Hooley, 2015; Renshaw, 2008). Moreover, subjective perceptions of criticism are often as or more predictive of treatment outcome than objective ratings of criticism (Chambless & Steketee, 1999; Hooley & Teasdale, 1989). Thus, perceptions of criticism—both hostile and nonhostile in nature—warrant careful attention.

A closer examination of perceptions of hostile and constructive criticism has revealed that perceptions of hostile criticism are strongly, negatively related to relationship satisfaction, whereas perceptions of constructive criticism are moderately, *positively* related to satisfaction in multiple types of relationships (Campbell, Renshaw, & Klein, 2015; Renshaw et al., 2010). However, these constructs themselves are not simply opposite ends of the same continuum, as they are only moderately negatively correlated with each other (Campbell et al., 2015; Renshaw et al., 2010). Therefore, determining the factors that underlie individuals' perceptions of constructive vs. hostile criticism may inform our understanding of couple functioning and prevention and intervention efforts for couples' distress. Given that objective ratings of how partners deliver criticism are only weakly to modestly related to perceptions of criticism from those partners (Masland & Hooley, 2015; Renshaw, 2008), other individual characteristics are likely critical to understanding these perceptions.

One likely influence is the manner in which partners regulate their emotions. People with disorders characterized by emotion dysregulation, in comparison to controls, tend to judge others' behavior as less positive, more negative, and more aggressive (Barnow et al., 2009). Thus, poor emotion regulation may contribute to a tendency to perceive criticism as more hostile and less constructive. Furthermore, emotion dysregulation is associated with fewer reported displays of positive and negative emotions (Gratz &

Roemer, 2004), and less objectively observed expression of positive emotion (Feng et al., 2009), suggesting that individuals with poor emotion regulation may also be seen as more hostile than those with better emotion regulation.

Much research on emotion regulation has focused on the use of specific emotion regulation strategies, particularly *expressive suppression*, which is the inhibition of verbal and nonverbal expression of emotions that have been generated, and *cognitive reappraisal*, defined as changing interpretations of an event to change the emotional response (Gross, 1998a, 1998b). Greater use of expressive suppression is associated with limited expression of affiliative behaviors with others (Butler et al., 2003; Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007; Gross & John, 2003; Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003), greater expressions of contempt and disgust in both members of couples (Ben-Naim, Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013), more hostile perceptions of the individual using suppression (Butler et al., 2007), and less friendly behavior from others (Butler et al., 2007). Alternately, cognitive reappraisal is generally associated with more experience and expression of positive emotion, less experience and expression of negative emotion, and greater perceptions of closeness and likeability by others (Gross & John, 2003). These findings suggest that suppression leads to negative social perceptions of others and by others, whereas cognitive reappraisal enhances positive perceptions of others and by others.

In spite of the empirical evidence connecting emotion regulation and perceptions of others' behavior, we identified no empirical studies of how romantic partners' internal emotion regulation affects their perceptions of each other's communication. The current study is a first step in addressing this gap by evaluating associations of emotion regulation of *both* partners in a romantic relationship with their perceptions of hostile and constructive criticism from their partners across multiple contexts. The information learned has the potential to lay the groundwork for future studies of this type. If emotion dysregulation is identified as a key factor in perceptions of hostile and constructive criticism, couples' therapies may benefit from incorporating individual interventions targeting emotion regulation processes.

#### CURRENT STUDY

To evaluate emotion regulation and perceptions at both general and momentary levels, perceptions of criticism and emotion regulation were assessed both globally and specifically in response to a series of three discussions. Data were collected from both partners, with assessment of both overall difficulties

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