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## Sequential Analysis of Affirmation and Disclosure in Couple Interaction: Associations with Relational Uncertainty and Relationship Distress

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Sequential Analysis of Affirmation and Disclosure  
in Couple Interaction:  
Associations with Relational Uncertainty  
and Relationship Distress



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# Relational Communication



- **Relational communication:** Verbal and nonverbal behavior that expresses information about the nature and status of a relationship (Baxter, 2004; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Foley & Duck, 2006)
- When relational communication efforts are unsuccessful, **uncertainty** results
- **Uncertainty:** Inability to anticipate and explain interpersonal behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975)

# Relational Uncertainty



- **Relational uncertainty** refers to the degree of confidence individuals possess about their intimate relationship (Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999)
- **Three types** of relational uncertainty:
- **Self:** One's involvement in the relationship
- **Partner:** Partner's involvement in the relationship
- **Relationship:** Status of the relationship itself

# Relational Uncertainty (cont.)



Relational uncertainty in couples predicts:

- **relationship dissatisfaction** (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Theiss, Estlein & Weber, 2013)
- **less intimacy** (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011a; Theiss et al., 2013; Theiss & Nagy, 2012)
- **trouble interpreting relational cues** (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005)
- **less openness and more aggressiveness** (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013)

# Relational Uncertainty and Interaction



- **Key question:** How do couples' interactions unfold under conditions of relational uncertainty?
- We draw on the **interpersonal theory of complementarity** (Sadler, Ethier, & Woody, 2011) to explain the links between interaction behavior and relational uncertainty

# Interpersonal Complementarity



- **Complementarity:** interpersonal actions are designed to evoke ‘restricted classes’ of reactions from partners (Kiesler, 1983)
- For example, behaviors designed to facilitate **connection and intimacy** are more likely to elicit **positivity** than hostility (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005)

# Interpersonal Complementarity (cont.)



- Two relational behaviors designed to promote connection in interpersonal relationships: **disclosure** and **affirmation**
- **Disclosure:** Revealing private information about oneself
- **Affirmation:** Friendly listening, empathic understanding, and acceptance of the other



# Violations of Interpersonal Complementarity



- **Relational uncertainty** is linked with interpersonal exchanges in which a partner's response to bids for connection, closeness, or intimacy are incongruent with expectations (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 2007)
- We hypothesize that relational uncertainty is associated with interaction sequences in which an individual's **disclosure** or **affirmation** is met with **hostility** from the partner

# Method



- 5-minute videotaped assessment of couple interaction led by an experimenter
- Self-report:
- **Relationship satisfaction:** Dyadic Adjustment Scale
- **Depression symptoms:** Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-IA)
- **Relational uncertainty:** 12-item version of the Relational Uncertainty Scale (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999)

# Participants



- $N = 97$  heterosexual couples (194 individuals)
- **Relationship status:** 74 married, 15 cohabitating, 8 dating
- **Relationship length:**  $M = 10.5$  years
- **Age:**  $M = 43$  years old
- **Race / Ethnicity:** 69% White, 15% Black, 9% Latino, 5% Asian, 2% other

# Observational Assessment



- Discussion task: “Describe the three best things in your relationship” (5 minutes)
- Interactions transcribed and coded using Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB; Benjamin, 1979; 1987; 2000)
- Coders trained to criterion reliability
- Coding reliability: ICCs ranged from .82 - .91

# Structural Analysis of Social Behavior

(Benjamin, 1979; 1987; 2000)



**Focus on Other**

**Focus on Self**

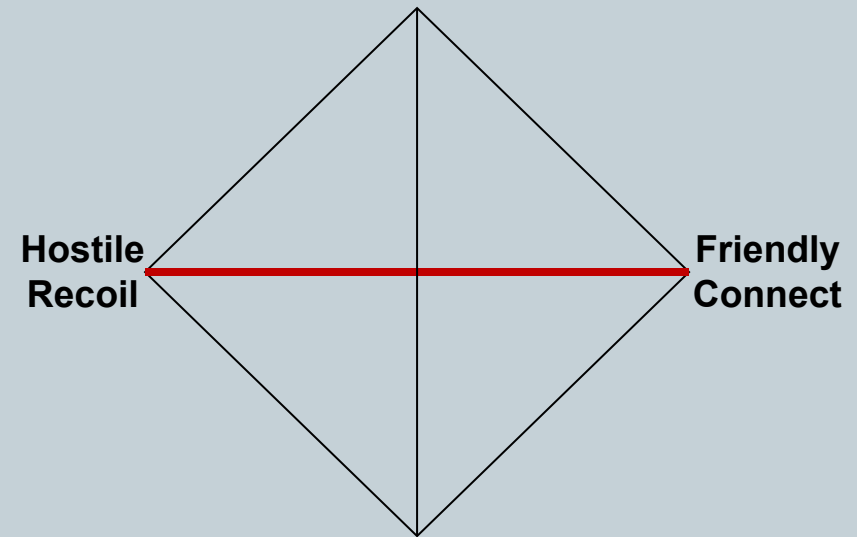
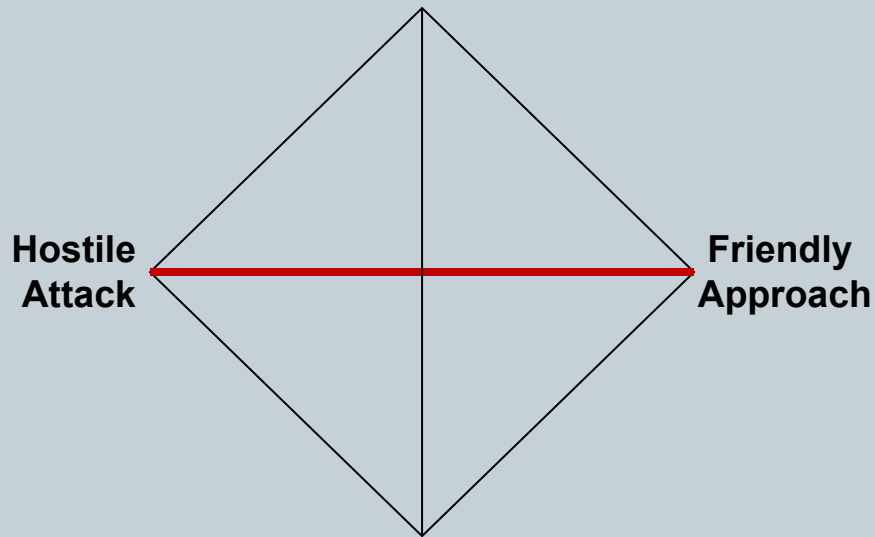
# Structural Analysis of Social Behavior

(Benjamin, 1979; 1987; 2000)



Focus on Other

Focus on Self



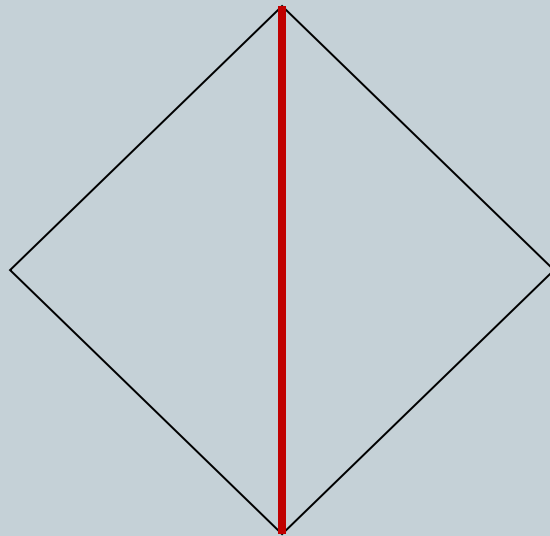
# Structural Analysis of Social Behavior

(Benjamin, 1979; 1987; 2000)



**Focus on Other**

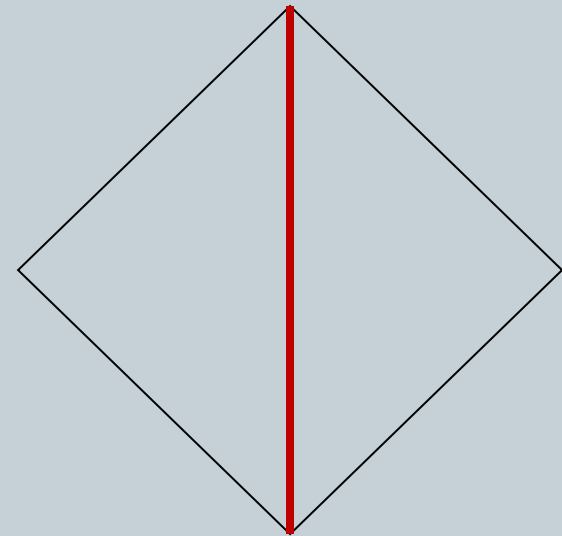
**Allow Autonomy**



**Control**

**Focus on Self**

**Take Autonomy**

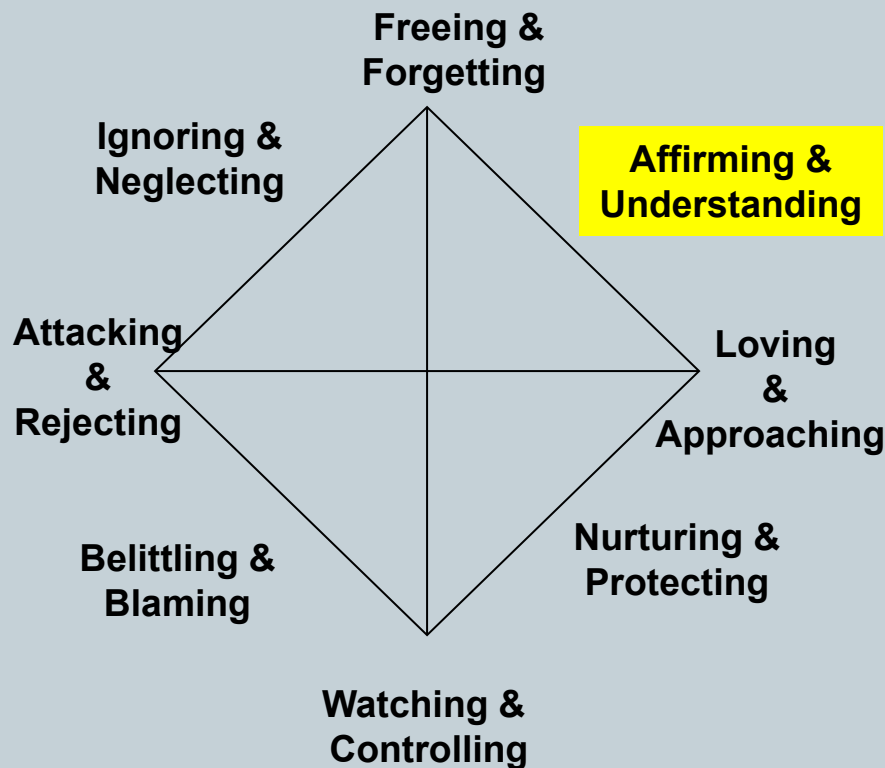


**Submit**

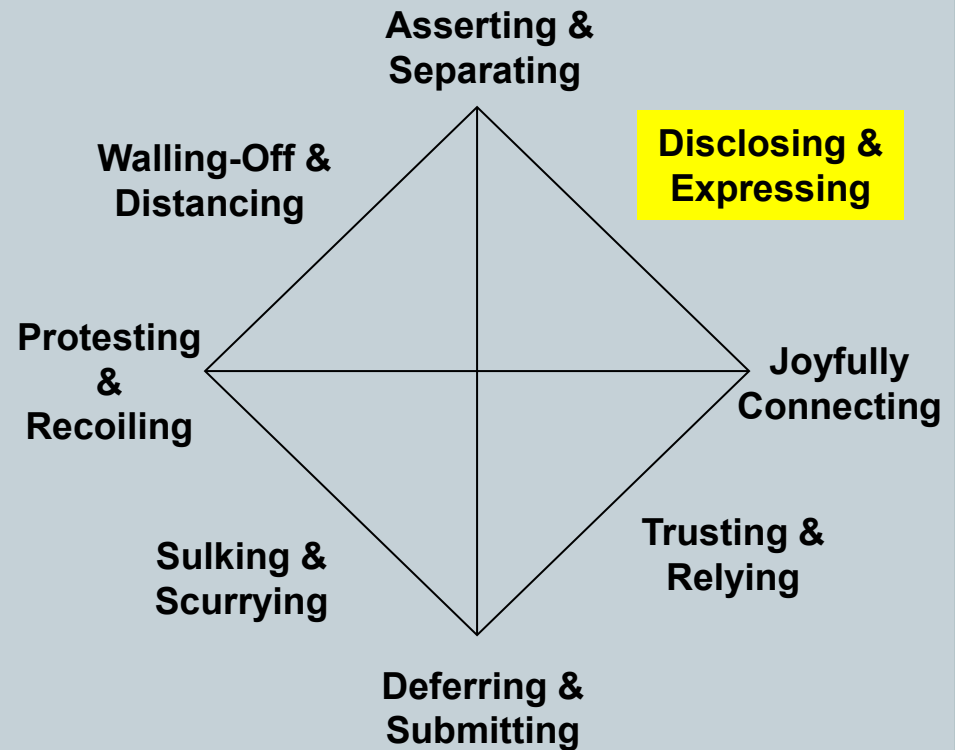
# Structural Analysis of Social Behavior

Two-word cluster model, first two surfaces (Benjamin, 1987)

Focus on Other



Focus on Self

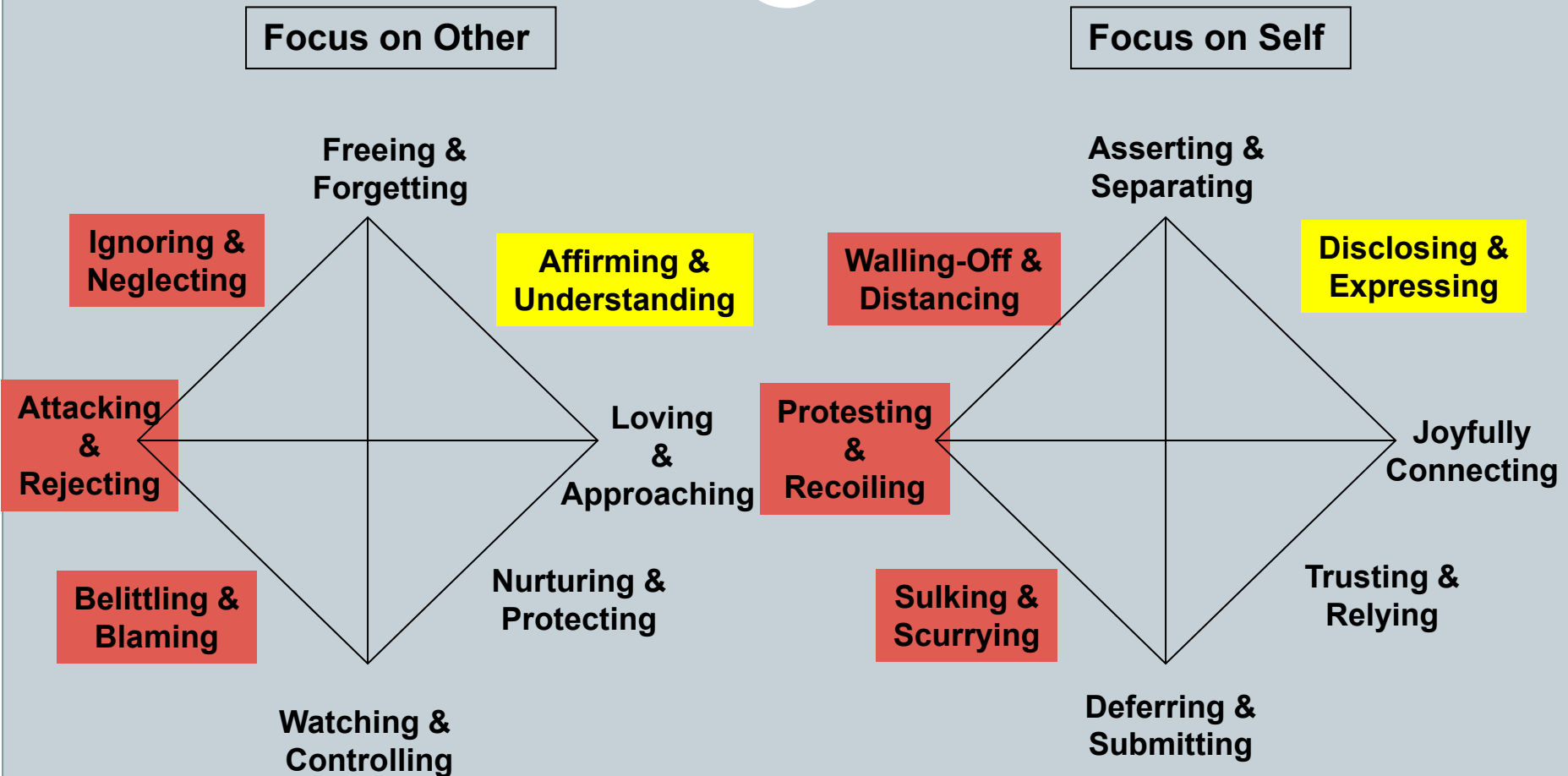


From Benjamin, L.S. (1987). Use of the SASB dimensional model to develop treatment plans for personality disorders, I: Narcissism. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 1,43-70. Copyright The Guilford Press.



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Two-word cluster model, first two surfaces (Benjamin, 1987)



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# Measurement of Sequences



- Interactions unitized into **turns of talk**
- Each talk turn evaluated for **disclosure** or **affirmation** (present / absent)
- Partner's next talk turn evaluated for hostility (present / absent)
- Frequency of sequence tallied according to the gender of the partner initiating the sequence

# Data Analysis



- Multilevel modeling using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to test for actor and partner effects
- Individuals nested within couples, couples distinguished by gender
- **IVs:** actor and partner relational uncertainty, relationship distress, gender, and depression
- **DVs:** Frequency of disclosure / hostility and affirmation / hostility sequences

# Results: Disclosure / Hostility

- **Men's self uncertainty** was positively associated with men's disclosure / women's hostility sequences,  $\beta = .240$ ,  $t(95.86) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .021$
- **Men's relationship uncertainty** was positively associated with men's disclosure / women's hostility sequences,  $\beta = .271$ ,  $t(96.32) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .008$
- Neither of these associations were significant for women

# Results: Affirmation / Hostility



- **Women** initiated more affirmation / hostility sequences than men
- **Self uncertainty** was associated with more frequent initiation of affirmation / hostility sequences,  $\beta = .220$ ,  $t(178.00) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .019$
- **Partners' (but not actors') relationship distress** was associated with more frequent initiation of affirmation / hostility sequences,  $\beta = .209$ ,  $t(120.28) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .027$

# Results: Affirmation / Hostility (cont.)



- **Relationship uncertainty** was associated with more frequent initiation of affirmation / hostility sequences,  $\beta = .224$ ,  $t(180.36) = 2.29$   $p = .023$
- **Partners' (but not actors') relationship distress** was associated with more frequent initiation of affirmation / hostility sequences,  $\beta = .189$ ,  $t(127.21) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .049$

# Discussion



- Results support the **interpersonal theory of complementarity** in the context of relational uncertainty
- Gender differences:
- **Men appear more vulnerable to relational uncertainty** when they disclose and their partners respond with hostility
- **Women** initiate more affirmation / hostility sequences than men do

# Discussion (cont.)



- **Questions about one's involvement in the relationship** predict more frequent initiation of affirmation / hostility sequences
- **Responding with hostility to affirmation** is an interpersonal marker of relationship dissatisfaction



# Future Directions



- Investigate longer chains of interpersonal sequences
- Examine relational uncertainty among couples with anxiety disorders
- Improve the effectiveness of couple therapy for relational uncertainty, relationship distress, and psychopathology

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