



PHYSIOLOGICAL PREDICTORS OF STRESS IN COUPLE INTERACTIONS

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Increased emotional distress is linked to greater physiological reactions. During relationship conflict, these physiological reactions impact each partner's physiological and physical well being. This emotional and physiological disturbance has been seen in direct relationship conflicts. Even though the aspect of the conflict that these disturbances are linked to creates physiological reaction, there are a multitude of factors that can explain this arousal. Overall individual stress or allostatic load, the subjective experience of stress in the given interaction, and the stress associated with the conflict topic are factors associated with physiological reactivity within relationship conflict. Few studies have examined the impact of individual allostatic load and subjective levels of stress in particular interaction on physiological reactivity during conflict-based interactions in couples.

The objective of this study is to test how physiological reactivity during stressful couple interactions is associated with stress specific to interaction, the stressfulness of the topic, and an individual's general stress level. This is a secondary analysis of an existing database of couples conflict-related interactions, that includes measures of physiological reactivity, Electrodermal response, partner reports of stress during the conflict, assessed using a Post-Discussion Questionnaire created for the original study, the stressfulness of a topic, assessed using the Problem Areas Questionnaire, and general life stress, assessed using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983). A series of regression will be conducted to test study hypotheses.

By studying the relationship between overall stress, situational stress, topic-related stress, and physiological reactivity in the context of couple relationships, results could help determine areas of improvement in the couple's therapy field. If the results of this study indicate that physiological reactivity in conflict discussions is more closely correlated to overall stress, then therapists would help couples address individual and shared external stresses in their lives. Or, if the results of this study indicate that the stress of a particular interaction is more impactful upon physiological reactivity, therapists could help couples teach problem solving skills to reduce conflict related stress. Furthermore, the proposed study creates a foundation for further research in the relationship between physiological reactivity, stress, and marital satisfaction.

