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BRIEF REPORT

Expressing Thoughts and Feelings Leads to Greater Empathic Accuracy During Relationship Conflict

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Many couple therapies focus on enhancing the disclosure of thoughts and feelings, and on an accurate understanding of these. But does the expression of thoughts and feelings lead to better empathic accuracy, as is generally assumed? In this study, we explicitly tested a dynamic expression-leading-to-accuracy account of empathic accuracy in intimate relationships. Specifically, in the conflict interactions of 155 mixed-sex couples, we investigated (a) whether greater momentary expressions of the target (self-reported vs. observed) were associated with more empathic accuracy in the perceiver; (b) whether this outcome was similar for the expression of thoughts versus feelings; and (c) whether the expression-leading-to-accuracy link was moderated by the perceived threat level of these thoughts and feelings. The data revealed that greater (self-reported and observed) expression of the target's thoughts and feelings was associated with better empathic accuracy by the partner; that this association was similar for thoughts and feelings; and that this link was not moderated by the perceived threat level of these thoughts and feelings. These findings confirm a fundamental assumption of couples therapy and have important implications for therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: thought/feeling expression, emotion expression, empathic accuracy, intimate relationships, perceived threat

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In couples therapy, partners are often stuck in interaction patterns in which they feel misunderstood by each other. Indeed, 27% of couples report seeking therapy because of a lack of perceived mutual understanding (Doss et al., 2004). To be able to understand one's partner during an interaction, two components seem crucial: (a) that each partner expresses his or her thoughts and feelings (*thought/feeling expression*) and (b) that these thoughts and feelings are accurately perceived by the other partner (*empathic accuracy*). Although this expression-accuracy link seems intuitive and has been assumed in multiple relationship and emotion theories (e.g., Sullivan & Davila, 2010), few studies have directly examined it. In this study, we build upon and extend recent research by examining (a) whether greater momentary expressions of the target (self-reported vs. observed) were associated with more empathic accuracy in the perceiver; (b) whether this outcome was similar for the expression of thoughts versus feelings; and (c) whether the expression-leading-to-accuracy link was moderated by the perceived threat level of these thoughts and feelings.

Empathic Accuracy and Target Expressivity

The extent to which individuals (perceivers) can accurately infer the content of the thoughts and feelings of other people (targets) as they spontaneously occur during interactions, has been referred to as *empathic accuracy* (Ickes, 1993).[1] This definition is closely connected to a research paradigm developed by William Ickes and others, in which people discuss certain topics and then watch video recordings of their interactions. Here, they not only report their own (perceiver's) but also infer their partner's (target's) successive thoughts and feelings throughout the interaction, from which

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This study used data from a larger study investigating empathic accuracy in intimate relationships, collected under a personal grant awarded to Céline Hinnekens from the Fund for Scientific Research—Flanders. The current study is conducted under a research project grant awarded from the Fund for Scientific Research—Flanders (No. 11Q9514N). Some of these data have been used to investigate questions not related to this research, and they have been presented at conferences and in previous publications that can be found on osf.io/esnwf. Relevant code and data to conduct the reported analyses can also be found on osf.io/esnwf.

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[1] The term empathic accuracy is often used to refer to the inference of feelings only (e.g., Zaki et al., 2009), but its original usage applies to the inference of both thoughts and feelings (Ickes et al., 1990).

empathic accuracy is derived by rating the similarity between the actual thoughts and feelings of the target and the corresponding inferred thoughts and feelings of the perceiver (Ickes et al., 1990). Interestingly, empathic accuracy research has shown that partners infer each other's thoughts and feelings with average empathic accuracy scores in the general range of 20%–35%, revealing that partners' empathic inferences are often inaccurate (e.g., Hinnekens et al., 2016).

The main challenge of being empathically accurate is that thoughts and feelings are only directly accessible to the target who experiences them. An important source of perceivers' empathic accuracy is, therefore, the cues that targets provide, enabling perceivers to accurately infer the targets' thoughts and feelings. Studies on the effect of information modality show that verbal cues are generally more important than nonverbal cues in this regard (Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007; Zaki et al., 2009). Indeed, research shows that targets whose thoughts and feelings are rated as more expressive by observers are "read" with greater empathic accuracy (Marangoni et al., 1995; Thomas & Maio, 2008; Zaki et al., 2009; but see Grant et al., 2018). In this line of research, the target's expressivity is assumed to be a relatively stable individual difference, typically calculated by an overall empathic accuracy score across the interaction (e.g., Human & Biesanz, 2013).

A Dynamic Expression-Leading-to-Accuracy Account

A key aspect of empathic accuracy, however, is that it unfolds over time. People decide to express some thoughts and feelings but to withhold others, thereby providing mixed cues about their real inner experiences. Empathic accuracy is therefore a constant process of attunement, being shaped and constantly changing by what is transpiring in the current interaction (Main et al., 2017).

This dynamic "expression-leading-to-accuracy" account can be found in many relationship theories. For example, social support by the partner is thought to be more successful with clear communication (Sullivan & Davila, 2010). In emotion theories, the same "expression-leading-to-accuracy" link is assumed. Emotions are thought to serve primarily a social and communicative function, with expression facilitating others' understanding and an appropriate responding to one's social environment (e.g., Van Kleef, 2010). Further, many couple therapies focus on enhancing disclosure as a way to promote better mutual understanding, making it a common element of successful therapies (Benson et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, direct empirical tests of the dynamic "expression-leading-to-accuracy" link have been relatively rare, despite the fact that the dynamic nature of emotions has been increasingly emphasized (e.g., Kuppens, 2015). Nevertheless, some research has focused on cues that enable perceivers to accurately infer the valence or the specific emotions of a target person (e.g., Howland & Rafaeli, 2010; Zaki et al., 2009). In a recent study, Overall et al. (2020) explored whether targets' negative emotion expressions dynamically enhance perceivers' accurate perceptions of those emotions. Using both daily life and laboratory studies, they showed that greater expression of negative emotions predicted perceivers' more accurate tracking of these emotions. In the present study, we extended this research by examining the effects of target-reported and observer-coded expressions of both thoughts and feelings, and their potential moderation by a perceived threat.

Self-Reported Versus Observed Expression

Expression can be operationalized from the target's own point of view (self-reports) or from an observer's perspective; and previous studies include both approaches (e.g., Marangoni et al., 1995; Overall et al., 2020). However, in many domains, such as personality and emotions, self-reports and observer methods have been shown to provide different information (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). In intimate relationships specifically, people have been found to exaggerate, for example, how responsive their behaviors are (Lemay, 2014). These findings raise an important question: To what extent are people aware of how transparently they express their thoughts and feelings to their partner? Indeed, people tend to think that they are more transparent than they actually are (Cameron & Vorauer, 2008). For this reason, we wanted to determine if perceivers' empathic accuracy varies depending on whether the targets' expression is measured by self- or observer reports (suspecting clearer associations between observed expression and empathic accuracy).

Thoughts Versus Feelings

In empathic accuracy research, a single overall measure of empathic accuracy is typically computed across all of the target's thoughts and feelings (e.g., Simpson et al., 1995), or for the target's emotions only (e.g., Zaki et al., 2009). However, thoughts and feelings are conceived as separate entities by lay people and have distinctly different linguistic characteristics, such as people using more words to express thoughts than feelings (Ickes & Cheng, 2011). The few studies in which empathic accuracy for thoughts versus feelings were separately assessed also revealed differences in underlying processes (Barone et al., 2005; Hinnekens et al., 2018). Importantly, people seem to pay more attention to nonverbal visual cues and less to verbal cues when inferring feelings than when inferring the thoughts of others (Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007). Also, even when emotions are not intentionally expressed, they tend to leak through in nonverbal cues (because they are so crucial for survival) and can be carried over from the target to the perceiver (e.g., by emotional contagion; Hatfield et al., 1993). For these reasons, the intended expression might be less crucial in empathic accuracy for a target's feelings than for a target's thoughts.

Perceived Threat

People can be motivated to be more or less empathically accurate (Ickes & Simpson, 2004; Zaki, 2014). Motivated inaccuracy can happen when this inaccuracy protects partners from recognizing information that can destabilize their relationship (Simpson et al., 1995; but note that in Hinnekens et al., 2018 this link could not be replicated). In situations in which one's partner's thoughts and feelings are relationship threatening, greater empathic accuracy can hurt the relationship by being personally distressing and raising doubts about the relationship's viability (Ickes & Simpson, 2004). A target expressing threatening emotions might therefore actually reduce the degree of empathic accuracy in the perceiver. As a result, the perceived threat might moderate the dynamic expression-leading-to-accuracy link. In this regard, it is notable, however, that some research shows that empathic accuracy is higher in times of conflict (Sened et al., 2017).

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Current Research

In the present study, our goal was to complement and extend the results of past studies in testing the expression-leading-to-accuracy link in intimate relationships. To this end, we used a modified dyadic empathic accuracy paradigm (cf., Ickes et al., 1990) in which 155 mixed-sex couples participated in a conflict interaction and afterward conducted a video-review task.

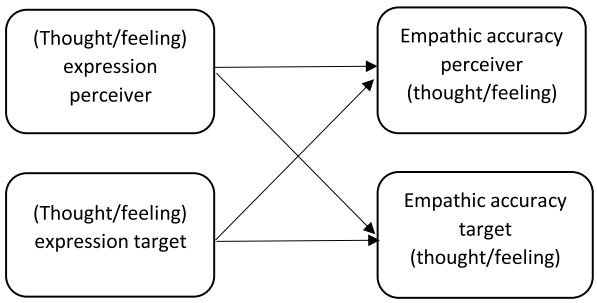
First, we examined whether greater self-reported expressions by the target were associated with greater empathic accuracy of the perceiver (see Figure 1; RQ1-A). At moments during the interaction, when targets are more (less) expressive, is their partner more (less) empathically accurate? We did the same for observed expressions (RQ1-B). We expected that both self-reported and observed momentary target expressivity would enhance the perceiver's momentary empathic accuracy; although, based on the literature, we suspected that the link might be stronger for observed expressions. We therefore also explicitly examined to what extent self-reported and observed expression provide unique information in predicting empathic accuracy (RQ1-C). Second, we examined whether these outcomes are similar for the expression of thoughts and feelings, tentatively expecting it might be stronger for thoughts (because of the scarce research suggesting that people focus less on verbal cues for feelings than for thoughts; RQ2). Third, we examined whether the expression-accuracy link is moderated by how threatening the perceiving partner thinks the thoughts and feelings of his/her partner are, expecting that perceived threat would reduce associations between expressions and empathic accuracy (RQ3).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 155 mixed-sex couples (310 participants) who were recruited through posters, social media, and local networks for a larger study of empathic accuracy in intimate relationships (see osf.io/esnwf, for publications on these data). Participating couples met the following criteria: (a) being in a heterosexual relationship, (b) cohabiting for at least 6 months, (c) in a relationship for at least 1 year, and (d) speaking the Dutch language fluently. Couples had been together for 12 years on average (SD = 141 months, min = 1 year, max = 47 years), and participants' average age was 35 years (SD = 14, min = 19, max = 76). Forty-five percent of the participants held a high school diploma, 31% held a bachelor degree, and 24% held a master or doctoral degree. All participants identified as men or women. Couples that completed the full study received 40 euros as compensation. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ugent, Belgium.

Figure 1
Example of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model Used to Assess Expression (Self-Reported or Observed) and Empathic Accuracy



Procedure

A researcher visited interested couples at home to determine participation eligibility and to provide study information. Participating couples then completed several questionnaires online. Next, they participated in a standard conflict interaction task. For most couples (n = 114), this interaction task took place in the lab, but for some couples (n = 41), it took place at home. Allowing couples to conduct the task at home resulted in a higher participation rate, as it was known from past studies that couples often refuse participation because they are unable or unwilling to come to the lab (e.g., because of geographical distance). Preliminary analyses with Wilcoxon rank-sum tests (with a p of .0125 to control for multiple testing) revealed no significant differences for all key variables between couples in the lab versus at home. Additionally, when couples who conducted the interaction task at home were omitted from the sample, the findings of the main analyses did not change.

Similar to previous studies of marital conflict, our conflict interaction task required the couples to discuss a problem that was a source of continuing disagreement in the couple's relationship (Roberts et al., 2007). To this end, the partners beforehand identified which topic they considered an important source of disagreement that they would like to change from a list of common conflict topics. Specific instructions can be found on https://osf.io/esnwf/. Randomly, the topic of one partner was selected for subsequent discussion, and this partner was instructed to introduce the topic to their partner (for goals unrelated to the present study). The couples were instructed to discuss the topic for 11 min and to try to come up with a solution. This interaction was videotaped, and the couples were left alone during their discussion.

Next, partners individually conducted a video-review task commonly used in empathic accuracy paradigms (Ickes et al., 1990), watching a video recording of their just-completed discussion. Every 90 s, the video paused, and participants answered several questions, resulting in seven video stops and responses. Specifically, participants reported on the content of their own thoughts and feelings during that point in the interaction by completing open-ended prompts ("I felt . . ." and "I thought . . ."). They then rated, among other things, how much they had expressed each thought or feeling, and its level of potential threats to themselves and the relationship. In a parallel manner, they inferred the specific content of their partner's thoughts and feelings and rated the perceived expression, valence, and threat potential of these inferred thoughts and feelings.

Measure

Empathic Accuracy

We followed the coding procedure developed by Ickes et al. (1990). The exact procedure can be found on https://osf.io/esnwf.

In short, four raters compared the written content of each of the thoughts and feelings reported by one person with the corresponding inference of the partner, by using a 3-point scale (0 = *different content from the actual thought/feeling*, 1 = *similar but not the same content as the actual thought/feeling*, and 2 = *essentially the same content*). This resulted in one empathic accuracy score for the perceiver's thought inference and one empathic accuracy score for the perceiver's feeling inference at each video stop. These empathic accuracy scores were then averaged across the four raters. The adjusted ICC (assessing interrater reliability) was .67 for thoughts and .72 for feelings, indicating moderate interrater agreement according to recent guidelines (Koo & Li, 2016).

Self-Reported Expression of Thoughts and Feelings

At each video stop, participants rated how openly and clearly they had expressed their thoughts and feelings toward their partner on a 4-point scale, with 1 = *not clearly at all* to 4 = *very clearly*. This procedure resulted in two self-reported expression scores——one for thoughts and one for feelings——at each of the seven stops.

Observer-Rated Expression of Thoughts and Feelings

The exact procedure can be found on https://osf.io/esnwf. In short, four raters judged each partner's observed expressiveness of thoughts and feelings by watching the videos and rating the difficulty of inferring each thought and feeling when reading the target's actual reported thoughts and feelings. A 3-point scale was used (1 = *very difficult to infer given the immediate context*, 2 = *somewhat difficult to infer given the immediate context*, and 3 = *easy to infer given the immediate context*). The adjusted ICCs indicated moderate interrater agreement (.65 for thoughts, .64 for feelings). Ratings were averaged across the four raters, resulting in observed expression scores for thoughts and feelings at each stop.

Perceived Threat

At each stop, participants rated how threatening the inferred thoughts and feelings of their partner were (a) to themselves and (b) to the relationship on a 7-point scale (1 = *not threatening* to 7 = *very threatening*). Averaging the items (α = .86 for thoughts and α = .85 for feelings) resulted in measures of perceived threat for thoughts and for feelings at each stop.

Results

Descriptive statistics for key variables can be found in Table 1. As might be expected, self-reported expressions of thoughts and feelings correlated positively with observer-rated expressions, ranging from .13 to .19, indicating a small-to-moderate size. These data suggest that although self-reported and observer-rated expressions correlate significantly, they each have unique variance as well. In our main analyses, we used multilevel models, taking into account that observations were nested within partners who were part of a couple (Kenny et al., 2006). Actor–partner interdependence models were used, meaning that we included actor variables as predictors when investigating partner effects. See https://osf.io/esnwf/, for details and code for the models.

All predictors were within-person-centered so that they reflected only within-person changes. In preliminary models, we also explicitly included between-person effects, which did not alter the results in any way. Further, preliminary models included (1) main and interaction effects with gender, revealing no interaction effects with gender; and (2) an inclusion of time to control for time trends, which did not exert a main effect in most models and did not change the results in any way. For parsimony, these variables were omitted from the reported analyses. Statistics can be found in Table 2.

Is Greater Self-Reported Target Expression Associated With Greater Perceiver Empathic Accuracy (RQ1-A), and is This Association Similar for Thoughts and Feelings (RQ2)?

First, we tested whether greater *self-reported expression* by targets predicted greater corresponding empathic accuracy by perceivers for thoughts and feelings separately (Model 1, Table 2). Indeed, greater momentary self-reported expression by the target was associated with greater momentary empathic accuracy by the perceiver for both thoughts and feelings. When targets reported having expressed their thoughts/feelings more at a given time, their partner was more accurate in inferring these thoughts/feelings at that specific moment in the interaction.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Key Variables

Variable	M_m	SD_m	M_w	SD_w	1	2	3	4	$r_{thoughts\text{-}feelings,\ m}$	$r_{thoughts\text{-}feelings,\ w}$
Thoughts										
1. Perceiver's empathic accuracy	0.41	0.54	0.39	0.52	—	−.02	.07*	−.05	.09**	.06*
2. Perceiver's self-reported expression	2.64	0.89	2.65	0.90	.03	—	.13***	−.08*	.46***	.52***
3. Perceiver's observed expression	1.55	0.52	1.61	0.53	.09**	.19***	—	.07*	.28***	.38***
4. Perceived threat by the perceiver	1.81	1.13	1.99	1.37	.02	−.07*	−.02	—	.82***	.82***
Feelings										
1. Perceiver's empathic accuracy	0.43	0.57	0.44	0.59	—	.01	.05	−.03		
2. Perceiver's self-reported expression	2.80	0.82	2.79	0.84	.06*	—	.14***	−.08***		
3. Perceiver's observed expression	1.83	0.49	1.89	0.53	.06*	.17***	—	.13***		
4. Perceived threat by the perceiver	1.78	1.15	1.96	1.31	.02	−.13***	−.01	—		

Note. We calculated Pearson correlations across timepoints, therefore resulting in large sample sizes (1,083), and significant values. We calculated the correlations for men and women separately. The correlations for key variables for women are reported above the diagonal, and for men below the diagonal. The correlations for key variables between thoughts and feelings are added separately in the last two columns (again separately for men and women).
* Correlation $p < .05$. ** Correlation $p < .01$. *** Correlation $p < .001$.

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Table 2
Results for the Main Models

Model	EA for thoughts β	*SE*	CI	*p*	EA for feelings β	*SE*	CI	*p*
Model 1								
Intercept	0.40	0.02	0.37, 0.43	**<.01**	0.43	0.02	0.40, 0.46	**<.01**
SELF EXPRESS P	0.00	0.02	−0.03, 0.03	.90	0.02	0.02	−0.02, 0.05	.41
SELF EXPRESS T	0.04	0.02	0.01, 0.07	**.01**	0.05	0.02	0.01, 0.08	**.02**
Model 2								
Intercept	0.40	0.01	0.37, 0.43	**<.01**	0.43	0.02	0.40, 0.46	**<.01**
OBS EXPRESS T	0.03	0.03	−0.02, 0.08	.18	0.01	0.03	−0.04, 0.07	.64
OBS EXPRESS T	0.27	0.03	0.22, 0.31	**<.01**	0.32	0.03	0.27, 0.38	**<.01**
Model 3								
Intercept	0.40	0.01	0.37, 0.43	**<.01**	0.43	0.02	0.40, 0.46	**<.01**
SELF EXPRESS P	−0.01	0.02	−0.04, 0.02	.45	0.01	0.02	−0.03, 0.05	.63
SELF EXPRESS T	−0.00	0.02	−0.03, 0.03	.93	0.00	0.02	−0.03, 0.04	.81
OBS EXPRESS P	0.04	0.03	−0.01, 0.09	.15	0.01	0.03	−0.05, 0.07	.72
OBS EXPRESS T	0.27	0.03	0.22, 0.32	**<.01**	0.32	0.03	0.26, 0.38	**<.01**
Model 4								
Intercept	0.40	0.01	0.37, 0.43	**<.01**	0.43	0.02	0.40, 0.46	**<.01**
OBS EXPRESS P	0.03	0.03	−0.02, 0.08	.19	0.01	0.03	−0.04, 0.07	.65
OBS EXPRESS T	0.27	0.03	0.22, 0.32	**<.01**	0.32	0.03	0.27, 0.38	**<.01**
Threat	−0.01	0.01	−0.04, 0.02	.42	0.01	0.02	−0.02, 0.05	.45
OBS EXPRESS T × Threat	−0.04	0.03	−0.10, 0.03	.30	0.00	0.04	−0.07, 0.08	.94

Note. Headings refer to the outcomes (EA or empathic accuracy for thoughts and EA for feelings). The predictors for each specific model (which are indicated in bold) are in the left column. *p* values <.05 are indicated in bold as well. SELF EXPRESS = self-reported expression; OBS EXPRESS = observed expression; P = perceiver; T = target.

Is Greater Observed Target Expression Associated With Greater Perceiver Empathic Accuracy (RQ1-B), and is This Association Similar for Thoughts and Feelings (RQ2)?

We computed the same statistics for *observer-rated expression* of targets' thoughts and feelings (Model 2). Greater momentary observer-rated target expression also predicted perceivers' momentary empathic accuracy for targets' thoughts and feelings.

To What Extent do Self-Reported and Observed Expression Provide Unique Information in Predicting Empathic Accuracy (RQ1-C)?

In a model including both types of predictors, the effects of self-reported expression by the target disappeared, while the effects of observed target expression remained unchanged (Model 3). These findings suggest that self-reported expression does not account for any additional variance than observed expression in predicting empathic accuracy.

Is the Expression-Accuracy Link Moderated by How Threatening the Perceiving Partner Thinks These Specific Thoughts and Feelings Are (RQ3)?

In a final set of models, we tested perceived threat as a main and interaction effect for the observer-rated expression of the target's thoughts and feelings (Model 4). These analyses revealed no main or interaction effects of perceived threat, suggesting that perceived threat did not moderate the positive associations between targets' expressions and partners' accuracies.[2]

Because the relationship between perceived threat and empathic accuracy is expected to depend on how distressing a situation is (Ickes & Simpson, 2004), we conducted follow-up post hoc analyses in which we included only the moments in which one of the partners actually reported experiencing negative emotions (see https://osf.io/esnwf/, for the results). In this way, we could explore whether the distressing aspect of the emotional experience was an important element for the moderating role of perceived threat. However, even for this select subsample of negatively valenced emotions, the perceived threat did not moderate the positive association between the target's observed expression of thoughts and feelings and their partner's corresponding accuracy. Surprisingly, for this subsample of negatively valenced emotions, a main effect of the perceived threat on empathic accuracy became evident, with more perceived threat predicting more empathic accuracy for feelings ($B = 0.05$, $p = .01$), but not for thoughts ($B = 0.02$, $p = .37$).

Discussion

In this study, we examined whether momentary self-reported and observed expressions of a target partner lead to greater momentary empathic accuracy by the perceiving partner (RQ1); whether this outcome is similar for expressing (and inferring) thoughts versus feelings (suspecting it might be stronger for thoughts, RQ2); and if the expression-leading-to-accuracy link is moderated by how threatening the perceiver thinks that these thoughts and feelings are (RQ3). As predicted, we found that both self-reported and observed expressions of targets' thoughts and feelings positively predicted

[2] We report only the results for observed expression given that self-reported expression did not account for any unique variance beyond observed expression, but we found similar results for self-reported expression.

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perceivers' corresponding empathic accuracy. Notably, observed expression accounted for unique variance above and beyond self-reported expression whereas the reverse was not true. We found no differences for thoughts vs. feelings, nor evidence of significant moderation by perceived threat.

The present findings are consistent with multiple theories that suggest an expression-accuracy link. In addition, they add nuance to past studies that have examined this link at a trait (e.g., Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007) or state level (e.g., Overall et al., 2020), by showing this link for both thoughts and feelings, and showing no moderation by the perceived threat level of these thoughts and feelings. The finding that the expression-accuracy link was evident for both thoughts and feelings is important theoretically, as expressions of thoughts and feelings tend to differ, and empathic accuracy for thoughts can rely on different (perceptual) processes than empathic accuracy for feelings (e.g., Hall & Schmid Mast, 2007). At least with regards to the expression-accuracy link, a future distinction between thoughts and feelings does not seem to be necessary.

Of further relevance to the generality of our findings, it is notable that they generalized across varying threat levels, though the possibility remains that our conflict context was not highly distressing, resulting in a low overall threat potential. Indeed, participants reported an average threat level of only 1.90 on a scale from 1 (*not*) to 7 (*very*). Other potential explanations for these low reports are underreports due to impression management (being unwilling to report feeling threatened) or retrospective biases (because participants feel good again after the interaction, they forget feeling threatened). Future studies should assess the moderating role of threat in situations that strongly elicit threat potential to investigate if our results generalize to situations of that type.

Another finding of interest in the present study is that the unique variance in targets' rated expression did not predict perceivers' empathic accuracy, whereas the variance that these ratings shared with observer-rated expression did. Our results suggest that empathic accuracy is influenced by the observable components of targets' expression as perceived by observers and targets. Potentially and speculatively, observed expression captures not only aspects of self-reported expression, but also aspects that the individual might not be aware of or reporting on.

The present study has important implications from a clinical perspective, as wanting to feel understood is crucial in intimate relationships, and misunderstandings are at the core of destructive interactions (Reis et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, many couple therapy models focus on improving emotional disclosure and understanding as ways to reduce relationship distress, including emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson & Gurman, 2005 and integrative behavioral couple therapy (Roddy et al., 2016). The present study provides supporting evidence for a focus on these processes in therapy. However, future research is needed: to establish boundary conditions to the beneficial effects of expressing and understanding one's partner's thoughts and feelings; to determine what partners can do to facilitate partner disclosure in the first place; and to explore other moderators of the "expression-leading-to-accuracy" link.

Future research could also counter some of the limitations of this study. Our sample size was reasonably large, but the number of observations per couple was limited. This might have limited the power to detect effects below a certain magnitude and potential moderators such as perceived threat. In addition, the interrater reliability scores of empathic accuracy and observed expression were only in the moderate range, warranting some caution in interpreting the findings.

Further, we used a convenience sample that is likely to be quite homogenous (cultural or racial/ethnic backgrounds were not explicitly assessed), which limits the generalizability of our findings. First, cross-cultural research shows that emotional expressivity differs across cultural groups (Matsumoto, 2009). The research on the cultural moderation of empathic accuracy is more mixed (and often confounded with methodological issues), but it suggests that patterns of accuracy might differ across cultures (Elfenbein et al., 2002). Second, including only self-identified men and women in heterosexual relationships limits the generalizability of our results to more diverse samples.

Finally, the selected methodology allowed to assess empathic accuracy without constraining the content of participants' thoughts and feelings, which stands in contrast to other dynamic methods where participants provide and infer continuous ratings of the valence of emotions or rate specific emotions. However, a drawback of this method is that it cannot disentangle process variables such as directional bias or tracking accuracy (West & Kenny, 2011).

In conclusion, the findings of the present study can be interpreted as empirical support for an often theorized dynamic expression-accuracy link in intimate relationships. These findings have important implications for understanding the factors driving empathic accuracy, and for clinical practice in which personal expressions and empathic accuracy are often explicitly targeted.

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