

## **Love and anger: Research explores regulation of romantic feelings**

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*The following article was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. The introduction was written by Dr. Anca Miron, a faculty member in the department of psychology at UW Oshkosh. Her research interests include how people regulate emotions and the intensity of their emotions. She and her student collaborator, Korey Lewis, are featured in the profile below.*

### **Introduction by Anca Miron:**

Last year I was contacted by the director of the UW Oshkosh McNair Scholars Program to see if I would mentor a student, Korey Lewis. Korey was an outstanding student from my psychology class, and I was therefore happy to work with him. My prior work on how people handle romantic conflicts suggests that thinking about an insignificant positive characteristic of their romantic partner decreases anger, whereas thinking about a more important partner quality (e.g., the partner's sense of humor) maintains anger intensity.

As a follow-up to this research, Korey and I were interested in exploring the possibility that individuals strategically use this method to regulate their romantic feelings. My research collaboration with Korey has been a wonderful experience. Seeing Korey take ownership of this project and become an involved and thoughtful researcher has been a source of continuous professional satisfaction to me.

*Questions answered by Korey Lewis, student researcher:*

### **Describe the project on which you and professor Miron are working.**

Dr. Miron and I have been exploring a specific strategy that individuals might use to control their anger at their romantic partner. For example, if individuals are motivated to feel anger towards their partner, they might use a strategy where they focus on a positive quality of their partner that is somewhat important to them. If they wanted to decrease anger, they may focus on a positive attribute that is less important.

In addition, we decided to explore whether individuals with high romantic anxiety, who tend to be clingy or needy towards their partner and are anxious about their relationship, differ in how they control their feelings of anger from those who feel less anxious in their relationship.

### **How is the work that you are doing important?**

The work we are doing is important for a couple reasons. First, by better understanding how people cope with anger and other unpleasant feelings, we can add to the literature on how individuals control their emotions in general. Our results suggest that anxiety about the relationship does influence how individuals regulate their feelings towards their romantic partners. Thus, future research would have to

take into consideration this aspect of relationships.

Second, this could have serious implications for couples counseling. Certain individuals, depending on whether they have high or low romantic anxiety, may rely on their romantic partner in different ways to regulate their emotions. Knowing that these differences exist could lead to more specific and nuanced approaches to couples counseling.

### **What got you interested in the project?**

I was awarded the opportunity to participate in the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, which is designed to help undergraduates earn a spot in doctoral school by finding student-faculty research pairings. My field of interest is psychology, and my first choice was to work with Dr. Anca Miron.

Something that has continued to interest me since the start of this project is the role of attachment styles on how individuals regulate their emotions. Attachment style is a term used to describe an individual's outlook and expectations concerning their relationships, such as whether the person believes he or she can rely on the partner for comfort and support. I find it very interesting how the relationship between a primary caregiver (e.g. mother) and an infant can have such a profound effect on how that infant later develops romantic relationship skills of his/her own.

### **What kind of work does your project entail?**

Dr. Miron and I spent the early part of spring 2009 designing the study, forming a research proposal and submitting our proposal to the University research ethics committee (IRB). After we were accepted, I spent the remainder of the spring collecting our first set of data. Then Dr. Miron and I spent the summer analyzing the results and writing the research paper.

After we finished the paper, we both agreed that the results were very interesting and more data should be collected so that we could present stronger results at the Midwestern Psychological Association (MPA). Brad Brezinski volunteered to help, and we have been collecting additional data since October.

### **What outcomes do you anticipate from this collaboration?**

We would like to present our findings at a major conference like the MPA conference in May. We also hope to be able to use the results from this project to write a manuscript and submit it to a peer-reviewed journal. This is the intended outcome of most research in psychology.

However, besides having strong results to present and publish, I hope the work I have completed will help me earn a position in graduate school. I would like to take what I have learned from this experience and continue to perform meaningful research in other areas.

### **What has been the most valuable part of this experience for you?**

The two most valuable aspects about this experience for me were learning about the process behind doing research and gaining the confidence in doing research. Before I began this project, I looked at research as an enormous, monumental task that almost seemed to be too much work to be worth it. However, it

became much more manageable as I went along, mainly because I had Dr. Miron to show me how to break the process down into manageable portions. Then, the more I started to realize that I could accomplish this project, the more interesting it became.

I do not think that I was intimidated by the idea of doing research before, but I definitely had some uncertainty of what to expect. Going forward, I can take what I learned here and have a better idea of what to expect in the future and be even more confident that this is something I can do well.

**In what ways has your professor guided you in this collaboration, and how do you feel about your own contribution to this work?**

Dr. Miron has helped me with every step in the process. Drawing from her past experience with research on emotion regulation, she had a good concept of how the study should be designed. From there she worked closely with me on every aspect of the project, providing much feedback and editing, while still allowing me to make the project my own. She had an appropriate timeline of when tasks needed to be completed and helped to keep me organized the entire way through the project.

Besides breaking down the project in a manageable way to help it seem less daunting, I am especially thankful for the help I received in analyzing data. Some of the statistical measures we used were ones I had never carried out before. She was able to explain these complex statistical procedures in a way that I could form a clear picture in my head about what was happening.

**What are you learning that you may not be able to learn in the classroom alone?**

I have learned more doing this research project than I have probably ever learned in a single college course. In addition to learning about the individual components of a research project, I learned the process of “trial and error.”

In the classroom, students might do their homework, then get a grade and sometimes receive comments about what they can do better. However, there was much more feedback and correction during this project. I would complete a task and then receive feedback on what I needed to improve, then I would change that part and obtain more feedback and that kept going until everything was completed successfully.

It is really great looking at the work that I did at a deeper level and getting the chance to continually improve upon it. Finally, I obtained a deeper understanding about how people regulate emotions depending on their anxiety levels than I ever could in the classroom.

**Would you recommend this kind of experience to other students?**

Definitely. I was able to learn a great deal of information, meet new people, gain friendships and really push myself to keep getting better. Plus, I have taken a big step forward in getting ready for the next stage in my life, graduate school.

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