INTRODUCTION

Background

- Effective communication about cancer-related emotional experiences between partners is an important aspect of coping with the disease.
- Higher cancer stage has been associated with greater emotional difficulties, but the association between cancer stage and emotional expression is unclear.
- Regarding gender, male partners may be more likely to engage in affective suppression. Previous research in non-cancer populations showed that male partners experience high negativity but do not express this to their partners during conflict discussions.
- Observational methods can provide unique and nuanced information regarding communication.

Study Aim

- To examine patients’ affective expressions as a function of cancer stage and gender, using observational methods.

METHOD/ANALYSIS

Procedure

- Couples completed a 15-minute videotaped conversation about a cancer-related topic (e.g., disease progression, plans for the future).
- Undergraduate coders observationally coded all interactions for affective expression using the Relational Affective Topography System (RATS).

Measures

- Affective Expression:
  - Hard negative (e.g., anger)
  - Soft negative (e.g., sadness)
  - Positive joining (e.g., warmth)
  - Positive individuating (e.g., amusement)
  - Flat affect (e.g., indifference)

Participants

- Patients (N = 266):
  - 31% stage 2, 28% stage 3, 41% stage cancers
  - 44% breast, 18% lung, 38% colorectal cancers
  - 65% female; 81% Caucasian
  - Mean age of 53.9 years

Analysis

- One-Way ANOVA was used to analyze study aims

RESULTS

- Result #1: Male-identifying patients showed higher flat affective expression compared to female patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) gender</th>
<th>(J) gender</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I – J)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Result #2: Female-identifying patients showed higher soft negative affective expression than male patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) gender</th>
<th>(J) gender</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I – J)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>- 0.244</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Result #3: Affective expressions did not significantly differ by cancer stage, nor did gender and cancer stage interact (p’s > .05).

DISCUSSION

- This study is the first to examine objective measures of affective expression in relation to cancer stage and gender.
- Results suggest that male patients may be more likely to suppress their emotional expressions, whereas female patients were more likely to show vulnerability and distress.

Limitations

- Limited number of minority participants, which limits generalizability
- Individual-level instead of couple-level, did not look at partners’ affective expressions

Implications/ Future Directions

- Future research is needed with a focus on partner affective expression and patient-partner interactions
- Objective data from couple conversations may help to inform and refine couple-based interventions for cancer

REFERENCES

1 – Manne et al., J Cancer Surviv, 2010
2 – Vodermaier et al., Br J Cancer, 2011
3 – Leo et al., J Fam Psychol, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by NIH funded research grant titled "Couple Communication in Cancer: A Multi-Method Examination" (R01CA201179) awarded to Drs. Langer and Porter.