

BACKGROUND

Higher levels of partner empathy are associated with improved mental health outcomes for people with depression (Fang et al., 2015). Research on partners of individuals with other mental health difficulties suggests that certain high-empathy profiles can be a risk factor for their own mental health (Dekel et al., 2018). Researchers propose that the cognitive dimension of empathy (CE) buffers against the distress of others whereas affective empathy (AE) increases susceptibility to it (Dekel et al., 2018; Salvarani et al., 2019), which prompts the adoption of a psychologically inflexible approach (Kent et al., 2019). Higher psychological inflexibility (PI), shown by rigidly prioritising psychological reactions over valued action, contributes to the development of mental health difficulties (Tyndall et al., 2018). Dispositional empathy dimensions and PI have not been examined in partners of people with depression.



AIMS & HYPOTHESIS

Aims: To assess the levels of dispositional empathy dimensions and PI for people who live with a partner with depression, and to investigate the role of dispositional empathy dimensions in (PI) for this cohort when controlling for relevant demographic factors.

Hypothesis: Lower levels of PI in this cohort were anticipated. Lower CE scores and higher AE scores were expected to predict PI.

METHODS

Design and planned analysis:

- Between-group: PI & empathy dimensions (study/comparison sample)
- Cross-sectional design, univariate regression: empathy dimensions → PI

Setting: Qualtrics XM online survey platform

Measures: Cognitive Affective and Somatic Empathy Scale (CASES):

- used 2 x 10-item subscales for CE (10 items) and AE (10 items)
- ↑ scores = ↑ empathy

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II):

- ↑ scores = ↑ psychological inflexibility / ↓ resilience

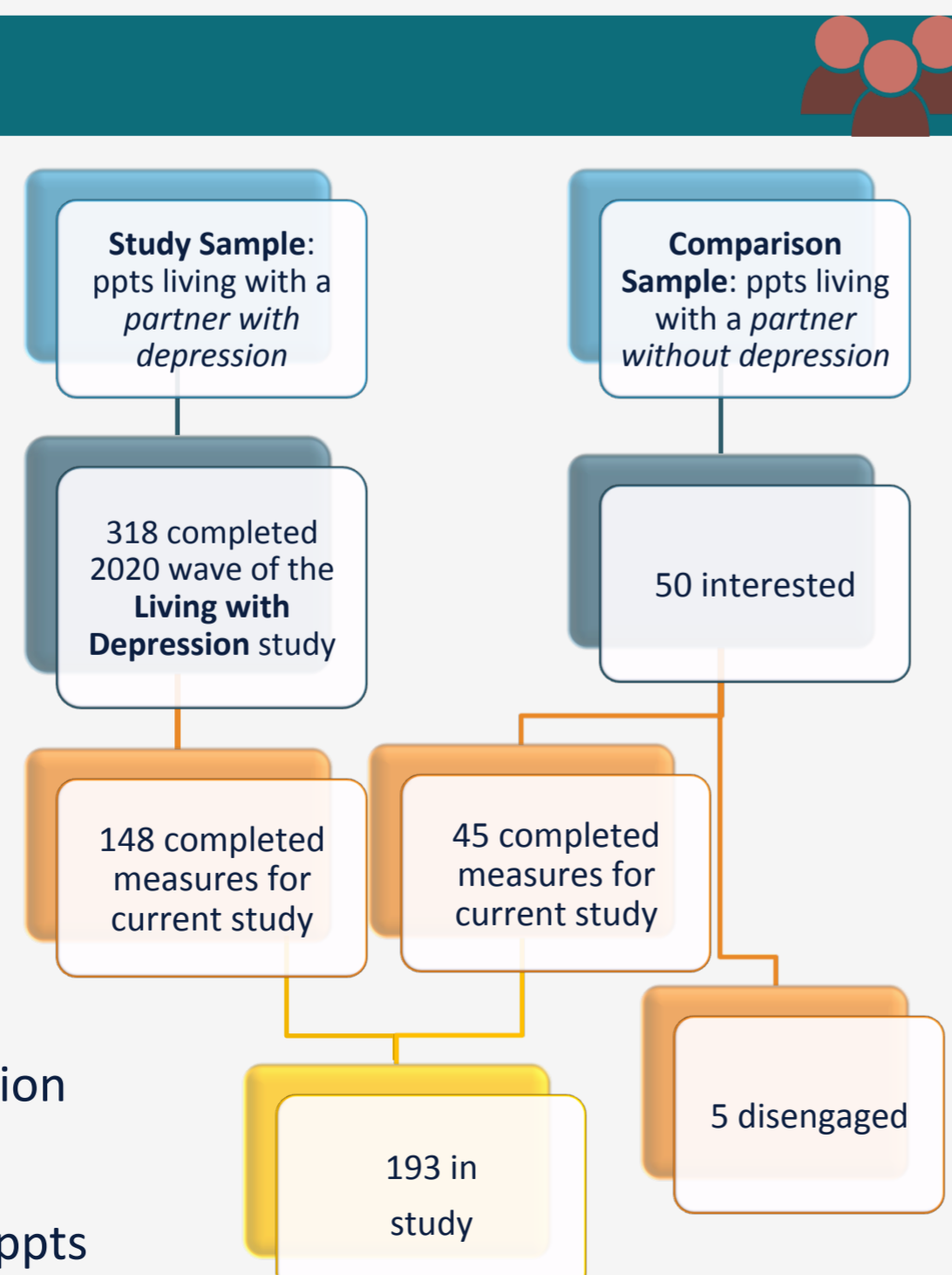
Demographic questions: age, gender, relationship duration, etc.

PARTICIPANTS

- 193 participants recruited via social media platforms ≥ 18 years, not experiencing psychological distress, living with a partner
- Females = 116, Males = 76, Gender-fluid = 1

Study Sample: 148 ppts with partners with self-/formally-diagnosed depression

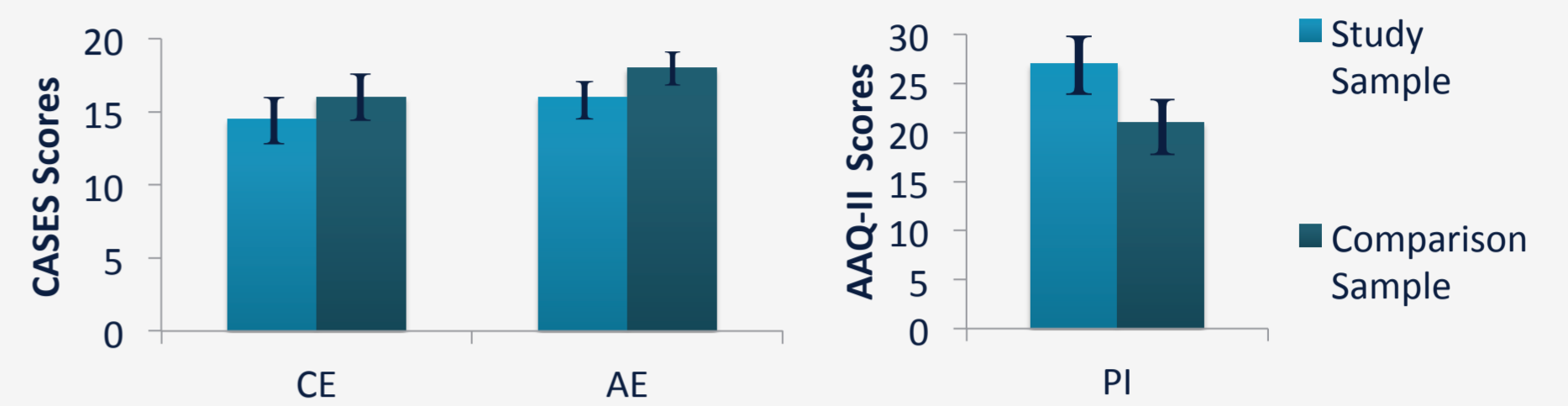
Comparison Sample: 45 ppts whose partners do not experience depression



RESULTS

Between-group analyses:

Median Scores for Study Variables



- **Cognitive Empathy and Affective Empathy** - Study Sample scored significantly lower than Comparison Sample (CE: $U = 2497, p = .011, r = .18$; AE: $U = 2044.5, p < .001, r = .28$).
- **Psychological Inflexibility** – significantly higher scores for the Study Sample than Comparison Sample ($U = 2080, p < .001, r = .27$).
- **48%** of Study Sample reached threshold for clinically relevant distress (AAQ-II score ≥ 28 : Ong et al., 2018) versus 18% of Comparison Sample.

Regression analysis controlling for associated demographic variables:

- **Cognitive empathy** – lower scores predicted higher PI scores.
- **Affective empathy** – no association with PI scores.

Variables with Significant Associations	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Age	-4.11	2.18	-.196**	-4.245	2.15	.202*
Previously experienced depression	4.87	1.48	.257**	4.67	1.46	.246*
Relationship duration	1.19	2.34	.062	1.03	2.31	.657
Marital status	-3.42	2.39	-.167	-3.87	2.36	-.189
Cognitive empathy				-.667	.273	-.229*
Affective empathy				.231	.312	.072
R^2		.166			.204	
Adj. R^2		.136			.163	
F for change in R^2		5.55**			3.24*	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

CONCLUSIONS

- Findings suggest that lower cognitive empathy plays a small but significant role in psychological inflexibility within this cohort whereas affective empathy plays no role.
- Need for psychological supports for partners of people with depression is indicated by the high proportion of the sample that met the threshold for clinically relevant distress.
- Interventions for partners of people with depression that enhance psychological flexibility may bolster the cognitive dimension of empathy and improve mental health outcomes for both members of the couple relationship.

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