

Emily A. Impett is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada.

Her research applies and blends social psychological theories of close relationships and sexuality to understand when “giving” to a partner—both inside and outside of the bedroom—helps versus harms relationships.

Her research has been supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. She has received several research awards, including the Sage Young Scholar Award from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology, the award for Early Career Achievement from the International Association for Relationship Research, and the Caryl Rusbult Early Career Award from the Relationships Researchers Interest Group from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology. She is also a fellow of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology.

Educational Background

Dr. Impett earned her B.S. in psychology with honors from James Madison University in Virginia in 1997 where she worked under the mentorship of Dr. Arnold Kahn. She then completed her M.S. in Psychology in 1998, and her Ph.D. in Social Psychology with a minor in measurement and psychometrics in 2004—both from the University of California, Los Angeles—where she worked under the mentorship of Dr. Letitia Anne Peplau and Dr. Shelly Gable.

Professional Career

After earning her Ph.D., Dr. Impett worked as a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality at San Francisco State University from 2004-2007 under the mentorship of Dr. Deborah Tolman. She completed a second postdoctoral fellowship in the Institute for Personality and Social Research at the University of California Berkeley where she worked with Dr. Dacher Keltner and Dr. Oliver John to gain additional training in emotions and personality. In 2010, she joined the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga as an Assistant Professor, and earned tenure as an Associate Professor in 2015. She has authored 70 publications in journals spanning a variety of disciplines such as *Psychological Science*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Personality*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *Personal Relationships*, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, and more. She presently serves as a Consulting Editor at five journals including *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Personal Relationships*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, and *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*.

Research Interests

Dr. Impett’s research is centrally focused on understanding when and for whom “giving” in the context of close relationships helps and when it hurts. In their close relationships, people are motivated to give to others, and they do so in a variety of ways. For example, parents make huge sacrifices for their children, and people go to great lengths to help a romantic partner in need. Sometimes, people engage in sexual activity when they are not “in the mood” in order to please their romantic partner. Some of these acts of giving are made at considerable cost to the self. What motivates people to give in the face of personal costs? When is giving rewarding and when

might good intentions backfire and potentially detract from the quality of relationships? How do people regulate the strong emotions they might feel when they sacrifice for others? Do some people enjoy giving more than others? To answer these questions, Dr. Impett conducts three main lines of research that draw upon theories of approach-avoidance motivation, emotion regulation and authenticity, and communal relationships. In her all of her work, Dr. Impett is highly committed to the use of rich, ecologically valid methods—including experience sampling, longitudinal, and dyadic methods—to understand how real-life giving and sacrifice shape people’s emotional experiences and the quality of their close relationships.

Approach-Avoidance Motivation

Why do people give to others even when it is costly for themselves? In one line of research, Dr. Impett applies approach-avoidance theories of social motivation to understand what motivates people to give to or make sacrifices for close others, as well as the personal and relationship consequences of giving in pursuit of different goals. Approach-avoidance motivational theory draws an important distinction between approach goals, which, in the context of relationships, involve pursuing positive experiences such as a partner’s pleasure or increased intimacy, and avoidance goals, which involve averting negative experiences such as a partner’s disappointment or relationship conflict. Dr. Impett’s research has shown that behaviors motivated by approach goals promote positive emotions and relationship quality, whereas behaviors undertaken to avoid negative outcomes arouse negative emotions and can have harmful consequences for relationships.

Emotion Regulation and Authenticity

Sometimes negative emotions such as irritation, resentment, or even anger can arise when people give up what they personally want to benefit their partner. Because intense emotions are inherent to sacrifice, how people deal with or regulate these emotions may be crucial. What should people do when their actual emotional experience is incongruent with what they personally hope to feel or would like others to feel? Is it beneficial to try to conceal or suppress negative emotions in these situations? In some ways, suppressing emotions could be seen as an intuitive way to keep the peace and manage situations of conflicting interests in relationships. However, Dr. Impett’s research has been crucial in showing that when people actively try to conceal their feelings about sacrifice from their partner or when they purposely try to amplify their positive emotions, they feel that they are not being authentic or “true to themselves,” and these resulting feelings of inauthenticity detract from both partners’ emotional experiences and feelings about the relationship.

Communal Relationships

Why do some people actually seem to enjoy making sacrifices? Many studies have now shown that receiving care or social support from others can be good for the self. However, a small but growing body of research is beginning to show that giving care to others can paradoxically be rewarding for the person who provides care. In communal relationships—such as those with family members, romantic partners, and close friends—people provide care non-contingently, that is, they prioritize giving care to the person who needs it most and do not expect to be reciprocated for their efforts. Dr. Impett investigates the rewards that communally motivated individuals receive from giving to others, as well as the ways in which communal giving benefits relationships. Her work has shown that highly communal people are more willing to care for and make sacrifices for others, and that they do not give to others begrudgingly—they actually

enjoy giving up their own interests to benefit a relationship partner. Her work has demonstrated the benefits of being communal in a variety of contexts—for example, for sacrifices made in daily life, when people “give” to their partner in the bedroom, and when parents care for their children.

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