

# Self- and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning

Colleen Saffrey & Kim Bartholomew

*Simon Fraser University*

Elaine Scharfe

*Trent University*

Antonia J. Z. Henderson

*B.C. Transplant Society*

Ray Koopman

*Simon Fraser University*

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## ABSTRACT

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This study investigated whether self- and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems predicted relationship functioning. Partners' understanding of one another's interpersonal problems, projection of their own problems onto their partners, and positive perceptions of their partners' problems were assessed. Individuals from 76 couples completed self-report measures of their own interpersonal problems and of their perceptions of their partners' interpersonal problems. Relationship functioning was assessed by self-reported satisfaction and by expert ratings of relationship quality. Partner-perceptions more strongly and consistently predicted relationship functioning than did self-perceptions. There was evidence of understanding of interpersonal problems, but degree of understanding did not predict relationship satisfaction or quality. Similarly, there was evidence of projection of level of interpersonal problems, but degree of projection did not predict relationship functioning. In contrast, positive perceptions of interpersonal problems were associated with positive relationship functioning.

KEY WORDS: couples • interpersonal problems • partner-perceptions • relationship satisfaction

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Various processes characterize the perceptions individuals hold of their romantic partners: They may show *understanding* of one another's characteristics; they may *project* their own characteristics onto their partners; and they may hold *positively biased perceptions* of their partners. The associations between partner-perceptions and relationship functioning have been investigated in domains such as attachment, conflict, and interpersonal characteristics (e.g., Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Ruvolo & Fabin, 1999). Although the results have not been consistent across all measures and relationship types, understanding, projection, and positive perceptions have been shown to predict relationship functioning (e.g., Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Murray et al., 1996; Ruvolo & Fabin, 1999). However, research has not considered how perceptions of interpersonal problems may be associated with relationship functioning. Interpersonal problems – difficulties encountered while interacting or attempting to interact with others – could negatively impact social relationships. For example, finding it hard to set limits on others, fighting with others too much, and being too independent could all interfere with the maintenance of satisfying intimate relationships. Whereas these problems could affect romantic relationship functioning directly, partners' *perceptions* of one another's interpersonal difficulties may be equally important to relationship functioning. Therefore, in this research we investigated the impact of self- and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems on two indices of couple functioning.

### **Self- and partner-perceptions**

Both partners bring their own characteristics into a relationship, and ensuing transactions within the relationship are likely to be affected by these characteristics. For example, individuals' personality, attachment, and interpersonal traits have been shown to predict relationship functioning (e.g., Cobb, Davila, & Bradbury, 2001; Murray et al., 1996; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000). Partners' interpersonal problems may predict relationship functioning as well. Therefore, the first purpose of this research was to investigate whether self-perceptions of interpersonal problems predicted relationship functioning. Partner-perceptions may also be important for relationship functioning. Numerous studies have shown that when partners view their partners positively, relationship satisfaction is higher (e.g., Cobb et al., 2001; Murray et al., 1996). Further, these associations are often stronger, and more consistent, than for self-perceptions. Therefore, the second purpose of this research was to examine whether partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems were associated with relationship functioning. We also assessed various components of partner-perceptions (understanding, projection, and positive perceptions) and whether each predicted relationship functioning.

### **Understanding**

A number of terms have been used to describe understanding: Self-verification, empathic accuracy, and partner agreement are the most

common (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). We defined *understanding* as agreement on one partner's interpersonal problems, controlling for similarity across partners on those problems. Understanding was assessed controlling for similarity for two reasons. First, similarity can result in a higher (apparent) level of understanding than really exists as individuals tend to see themselves in others (e.g., Murray et al., 1996). If two partners are actually similar, then their apparent understanding of one another will be high irrespective of whether individuals are reporting a reflection of themselves or a true sense of what their partner is like. Second, understanding may be most important when it occurs for characteristics that one partner does not possess (cf. Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). The greatest effect on relationship functioning may occur when an individual has the capacity to be empathic about a partner's specific interpersonal problem when the problem is not self-characteristic.

In this study, understanding was assessed in two ways. First, understanding described the association between self-perceptions and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems across couples (controlling for similarity). Second, an idiographic approach to understanding was taken by assessing the degree of within-couple matching in profiles of interpersonal problems. Unlike the first approach, analyses based on within-couple understanding are independent of the mean level of problems: Understanding correlations represent the extent to which partners agree in the *relative* descriptiveness of each problem that characterizes one partner (again, controlling for similarity). For example, if Madeleine sees herself as being more unassertive than aggressive and more compliant than overly independent, does her partner Ryan also share that perception?

Numerous studies have shown convergence between partners' views of self-attributes such as musical ability, intelligence, and physical attractiveness (e.g., De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann et al., 1994). Only a few studies have focused on interpersonal domains. For example, Murray et al. (1996) found evidence of understanding using a variety of interpersonal traits (e.g., tolerant, accepting, judgmental). Two other studies have looked specifically at understanding of interpersonal problems: Hill, Zrull, and McIntire (1998) found low to moderate correlations between self-reports and friend-reports of interpersonal problems, and Foltz, Morse, and Barber (1999) found moderate levels of understanding between self-reports and romantic-partner-reports of interpersonal problems.

Although a number of studies have considered how understanding relates to relationship functioning, the findings vary across married and dating samples, and depend on the measure in consideration. There is evidence that understanding is associated with relationship satisfaction in married couples for conflict, attachment, and self-attributes (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Swann et al., 1994). In contrast, other research has failed to document an association between relationship functioning and understanding of interpersonal traits or attachment in married and dating couples (Murray et al., 1996; Tucker & Anders, 1999). However, research has not investigated understanding of

interpersonal problems and relationship functioning. The closest work is that of Foltz et al. (1999), who considered whether the level of understanding of interpersonal problems across couples was associated with measures of individual symptomatology. The findings depended on the target person's sex: Understanding of women's problems was associated with symptomatology in women, whereas there was no association between understanding of men's problems and symptomatology for men. However, these results should be interpreted with caution because Foltz et al. (1999) failed to control for similarity in their assessment of understanding.

One reason individuals may seek confirmatory feedback from others, even when it is negative, is the desire to have interactions unfold in a predictable manner (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). For example, if Ryan lacks awareness that Madeleine has difficulty introducing herself to new people, he may become frustrated and angry with her unwillingness to interact with his friends. However, if Ryan understands Madeleine's difficulties, he may be sympathetic to her discomfort and appreciative that she is willingly putting herself in an uncomfortable situation. Thus, understanding of interpersonal problems may facilitate interaction. Therefore, the third purpose of this study was to assess the level of understanding of interpersonal problems in couples, and to investigate whether understanding was associated with relationship functioning.

### **Projection**

We defined *projection* as the association between individuals' self-perceptions and their perceptions of their partners' problems, controlling for similarity. If similarity is not controlled for, then individuals may see characteristics of themselves in their partners because they are truly alike. Similar to understanding, projection was assessed in two ways. First, across couples, projection occurred when individuals' self-perceptions were associated with their perceptions of their partners, controlling for their partners' self-perceptions. Second, an idiographic approach to projection (based on within-couple variables) was taken by assessing the extent to which individuals ranked their own and their partners' interpersonal problems similarly in terms of their relative descriptiveness (controlling for similarity). For example, if Ryan sees himself as more distant than self-disclosing, does he also falsely see his partner Madeleine in a similar way? When individuals project their problems onto their partners, their level of understanding of their partners will inevitably be lower. However, the reverse is not necessarily true: Low levels of understanding do not automatically suggest high levels of projection.

Projection occurs in a variety of domains, ranging from attitudes, to personality traits, to interpersonal characteristics. For example, Murray et al. (1996) found projection of interpersonal traits, and there is some evidence for projection of attachment styles (e.g., Ruvolo & Fabian, 1999). Although interpersonal traits and attachment are interpersonal in nature, no consideration has been given to whether there is projection of

interpersonal problems, or how the process may be associated with relationship functioning.

Projection of interpersonal problems may occur because individuals who perceive their romantic partners (whose love and acceptance is highly valued) as possessing similar problems may feel more secure in their relationship. For example, Madeleine may feel she is too afraid of others, and she sees Ryan in the same way even though he does not have this problem. Although Madeleine's perception may not be accurate, she may take comfort that her partner grapples with a similar difficulty. The process of self-expansion (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) also may account for projection of interpersonal problems (cf. Ruvolo & Fabian, 1999). Self-expansion occurs when the distinction between self and other is attenuated. Consequently, individuals may over-estimate the similarity between themselves and their partners on interpersonal problems because they confuse their own problems with those of their partner. The closer and more satisfied two romantic partners are, the more self-expansion occurs (Aron & Fraley, 1999) and the more projection may occur. In summary, the fourth purpose of the study was to investigate projection of interpersonal problems, and whether degree of projection was associated with relationship functioning.

### Positive perceptions

Positive perceptions – sometimes referred to as idealization in the literature – occur when individuals see their partners in an overly positive light. Positively biased perceptions have been shown to predict relationship functioning in a variety of areas such as interpersonal traits, self-attributes, and attachment (e.g., Cobb et al., 2001; Murray et al., 1996; Swann et al., 1994). Similar to understanding, however, the findings differ pending on the domain and sample type (dating or married). Whereas Swann et al. (1994) found evidence of the benefit of positive perceptions only in dating couples, Murray et al. (1996) and Cobb et al. (2001) have found support for the benefit of positive perceptions in both dating and married couples.

In this study, *positive perceptions* of interpersonal problems occurred when individuals saw their partners as having lower levels of interpersonal problems than their partners perceived themselves as having. Positive perceptions were assessed across couples only. A within-couple analytic approach is not appropriate for assessing positive perceptions because they require a comparison of level – a within-couple approach compares profiles of ratings across partners, and therefore is not sensitive to the mean level of problems. A way to assess positive perceptions within couples would be to have couple members complete the problem measures for an ideal partner (a questionable task) and then to compare the profile of their ideal partner with their ratings of their actual partner (cf. Murray et al., 1996). Positive perceptions of interpersonal problems may help to minimize or create excuses for a partner's problematic behavior (cf. Murray et al., 1996). For example, if Madeleine tries too hard to please others and lets other people take advantage of her, Ryan may construe such behavior as her being a nice and accommodating person, rather than as her being

dependent and unassertive. Thus, the fifth purpose of this study was to investigate the association between positive perceptions of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning.

## Method

### Overview

A sample of young couples completed a package of questionnaires and an attachment interview. Interpersonal problems were assessed by self-report and partner-report versions of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Circumplex (IIP-C; Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990). Two measures of relationship functioning were obtained: a self-report rating of satisfaction, and a relationship quality rating derived from the Peer Attachment Interview (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Participants were recruited through one of the following: video ads around the university, print ads in the university newspaper, a volunteer participation pool (students recruited from nonpsychology classes), and a psychology participation pool (students from introductory and research methods classes).

### Sample

The sample comprised 76 young heterosexual couples. Requirements for inclusion in the study were: couples had been together for at least two years, one member of each couple was 35 or fewer years of age, and couples had no children. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 41 years, with a mean of 24.66 years ( $SD = 4.52$  years). Couples had been together from 24 to 168 months, with a mean relationship length of 48.12 months ( $SD = 28.93$  months). Twenty-eight percent of the sample were married, 44% were cohabiting, and 28% were dating. Eighty-eight percent of the participants were Caucasian, 9% were Asian, and 3% were Other.

### Measures

**The Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Circumplex.** The IIP-C (Alden et al., 1990) is a 64-item self-report measure of interpersonal problems derived from the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno, & Villasenor, 1988). The 64 IIP-C items sample interpersonal difficulties that individuals may have while interacting or attempting to interact with others. Difficulties are assessed by two types of questions: things that are 'hard for you to do' (e.g., It is hard for me to say 'no' to other people) and things that 'you do too much' (e.g., I trust other people too much). Participants are instructed 'for each item, select the number that describes how much of a problem that item has been for you.' Ratings are made on a 5-point scale ranging from 0, *not at all*, to 4, *extremely*. In the partner-report version of the IIP-C, individuals are instructed 'for each item, select the number that describes how much of a problem that item has been for your partner.' The measure is identical to the self-report version except the referent is changed (e.g., It is hard for my partner to say 'no' to other people).

The IIP-C is broken down into eight octants, with eight items assessing each octant. The eight subscales are Domineering, Vindictive, Cold, Socially Avoidant, Nonassertive, Exploitable, Overly Nurturant, and Intrusive. Total

scale scores were derived by averaging responses to eight items that correspond to each octant. Coefficient alphas for the subscales ranged from .67 to .87 (*Mdn* = .78) for women's self-reports, from .67 to .86 (*Mdn* = .77) for men's self-reports, from .61 to .90 (*Mdn* = .85) for women's partner-reports, and from .72 to .89 (*Mdn* = .83) for men's partner-reports. An overall level of problems was also calculated by taking the mean score from all 64 items. Alphas for the overall level of problems were .93 for women's self-reports, .92 for men's self-reports, .94 for women's partner-reports, and .92 for men's partner-reports.

**Relationship Satisfaction Scale.** The Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSS) is a self-report measure consisting of seven items rated on 9-point Likert scales. Participants rated the closeness of their relationship, their love for their partner, the importance and likelihood of continuing their relationship, the amount of happiness in their relationship, how often their partner got on their nerves, and the frequency of considering ending their relationship. Scores on the seven items were averaged to yield an overall satisfaction rating. A confirmatory factor analysis confirmed unidimensionality. Cronbach's alphas were .85 for women's self-reports and .87 for men's self-reports.

**Relationship Quality Rating.** The Peer Attachment Interview (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is a semi-structured interview of approximately 60 minutes, covering experiences in close friendships and romantic relationships. Each partner completed the interview separately. The Peer Attachment Interview yields a *relationship quality* rating for the current romantic relationship in which the individual is involved. There were two quality ratings for each couple: One for the man and one for the woman. The rating was based on responses to questions that covered areas such as communication, support, love-worthiness, trust, conflict resolution, and responses to separation. Quality ratings ranged from 1 (*very poor*) to 9 (*excellent*). Two independent coders rated each participant, and the raters were independent across couple members. Final ratings for each participant were the mean of the two coders' scores. Coders were undergraduate or graduate students who had completed approximately 250 hours of training. Inter-rater reliability was .87 for women's quality ratings and .84 for men's quality ratings (based on intraclass correlations).

## Results

Table 1 presents the means for the interpersonal problem and relationship functioning ratings. With 3 exceptions out of 60 tests, partners rated domineering, vindictive, and cold problems significantly lower than problems corresponding to the remaining octants ( $t(75)$  ranged from 2.03 to 7.27,  $ps < .05$ ). Mean ratings of satisfaction were high (7.63 for women and 8.00 for men, on a 9-point scale), and women's and men's self-reported satisfaction were strongly correlated ( $r(76) = .59$ ). Expert coders saw the participants' relationship quality as, on average, only moderate (5.16 for women and 5.24 for men, on a 9-point scale), and women's and men's relationship quality ratings were strongly related ( $r(76) = .59$ ). Satisfaction and quality were correlated; for women,  $r(76) = .40$ , and for men,  $r(76) = .55$ .

**TABLE 1**  
**Means and standard deviations for the IIP-C scales and mean level of problems, satisfaction ratings, and quality ratings, by sex**

Measure	Men		Women	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-perception				
Mean level	1.17	0.41	1.10	0.45
Domineering	0.91	0.61	0.83	0.51
Vindictive	0.90	0.47	0.83	0.57
Cold	0.95	0.57	0.76	0.60
Socially avoidant	1.39	0.81	1.22	0.82
Nonassertive	1.42	0.73	1.42	0.81
Exploitable	1.43	0.66	1.37	0.74
Overly-nurturant	1.41	0.62	1.30	0.64
Intrusive	0.94	0.59	1.11	0.69
Partner-perception <sup>a</sup>				
Mean level	0.91	0.45	1.08	0.43
Domineering	0.63	0.60	0.84	0.61
Vindictive	0.60	0.50	0.82	0.60
Cold	0.84	0.75	0.68	0.60
Socially avoidant	1.26	0.93	1.17	0.79
Nonassertive	1.27	0.82	1.41	0.85
Exploitable	1.16	0.81	1.39	0.76
Overly-nurturant	1.05	0.72	1.31	0.65
Intrusive	0.45	0.39	1.05	0.60
Satisfaction	7.63	0.89	8.00	0.77
Quality	5.16	1.40	5.24	1.46

*Note.* Ratings for the subscales were on a 5-point scale (0–4). Ratings for Satisfaction and Quality were on a 9-point scale (1–9).

<sup>a</sup>Partner-perceptions refer to women's perceptions of men in column one, and men's perceptions of women in column three.

### Self-perceptions and relationship functioning

Self-perceptions on the mean level of problems were somewhat associated with relationship functioning (see Table 2). There was a negative association between women's tendency to see themselves as having interpersonal problems and both their own relationship quality and their partners' satisfaction. Men's self-perceptions of the level of problems were negatively associated with their own relationship satisfaction and quality.

Most of the significant associations between the octant subscales and relationship functioning were found for hostile dominant problems. When women saw themselves as domineering, both partners' satisfaction was lower. Women's self-perceptions on the vindictive scale were also negatively related with both partners' satisfaction and relationship quality. The same pattern was found for the cold scale (with the exception of men's relationship quality) and for the intrusive scale (with the exception of women's satisfaction). Finally, it is interesting to note that women's self-perceptions were negatively associated with their own relationship quality across all octants except one.

Taken together, these findings indicate that women's self-perceptions of

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlations between self-perceptions and relationship satisfaction and quality, by sex**

IIP-C Scale	Female outcome		Male outcome	
	Satisfaction	Quality	Satisfaction	Quality
Mean level				
Women	-.12	-.41***	-.30**	-.22
Men	-.08	-.20	-.24*	-.24*
Domineering				
Women	-.28*	-.12	-.24*	-.20
Men	-.08	-.20	-.19	-.10
Vindictive				
Women	-.23*	-.28*	-.36**	-.25*
Men	-.04	-.20	-.21	-.08
Cold				
Women	-.26*	-.23*	-.30*	-.17
Men	-.08	-.21	-.33**	-.24*
Socially avoidant				
Women	-.05	-.35**	-.19	-.06
Men	.14	-.00	-.00	-.11
Nonassertive				
Women	.02	-.25*	-.12	.01
Men	.00	-.04	-.11	-.13
Exploitable				
Women	.01	-.35**	-.17	-.13
Men	-.18	-.17	-.22	-.18
Overly-nurturant				
Women	.05	-.26*	-.07	-.17
Men	-.12	-.19	-.17	-.29*
Intrusive				
Women	-.01	-.30**	-.24*	-.29*
Men	-.13	-.10	-.19	-.13

Note. Pearson Correlations;  $N = 76$ .

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.

interpersonal problems, especially those related to hostile–dominance, predicted both partners’ satisfaction and quality fairly consistently. Moreover, the majority of associations were across, rather than within, method. Within method refers, for example, to women’s self-perceptions of problems and their own relationship satisfaction. Across methods refers, for example, to women’s self-perceptions of problems and both partners’ relationship quality (which was rated by an expert). In contrast to the findings for women’s self-perceptions, there were few associations between men’s self-perceptions of problems and either partners’ satisfaction and quality.

#### Partner-perceptions and relationship functioning

There were significant negative correlations between women’s perceptions of their male partners’ mean level of problems and both partners’ relationship satisfaction and quality (see Table 3). Similarly, when men saw their female

**TABLE 3**  
**Correlations between partner-perceptions and relationship satisfaction and quality, by sex**

IIP-C Scale	Female outcome		Male outcome	
	Satisfaction	Quality	Satisfaction	Quality
Mean level				
Women's perceptions of men	-.24*	-.40***	-.40***	-.42***
Men's perceptions of women	-.13	-.39***	-.27*	-.29*
Domineering				
Women's perceptions of men	-.17	-.45***	-.18	-.18
Men's perceptions of women	-.29*	-.28*	-.35**	-.47***
Vindictive				
Women's perceptions of men	-.18	-.43***	-.19	-.26*
Men's perceptions of women	-.25*	-.37**	-.45**	-.34**
Cold				
Women's perceptions of men	-.23*	-.46***	-.37***	-.41**
Men's perceptions of women	-.31**	-.26*	-.35**	-.21
Socially avoidant				
Women's perceptions of men	-.05	-.22	-.12	-.27*
Men's perceptions of women	-.03	-.30*	-.26*	.01
Nonassertive				
Women's perceptions of men	-.17	-.11	-.26*	-.20
Men's perceptions of women	.02	-.30**	-.10	-.15
Exploitable				
Women's perceptions of men	-.16	-.16	-.32**	-.33**
Men's perceptions of women	.08	-.11	.05	-.04
Overly-nurturant				
Women's perceptions of men	-.22	-.19	-.41***	-.31**
Men's perceptions of women	.07	-.01	.19	-.05
Intrusive				
Women's perceptions of men	-.09	-.16	-.21	-.18
Men's perceptions of women	-.04	-.31**	-.17	-.31**

Note. Pearson correlations;  $N = 76$ .

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.

partners as having fewer problems, their own satisfaction and quality were higher, and women's relationship quality was also higher.

As with self-perceptions, partner-perceptions of hostile-dominant problems were associated with relationship functioning. When women saw their partners as more vindictive, both partners' relationship quality was lower. Further, women's perceptions of their partners as having problems with coldness were related to both members' satisfaction and quality, and women's perceptions of their partners' exploitable and overly nurturant problems were related to men's satisfaction and quality. Women's perceptions of men's problems were associated with men's satisfaction and quality more consistently than with their own satisfaction and quality.

When men saw their partners as domineering, vindictive, and cold, both members of the couple were less satisfied and had lower relationship quality.

Further, when men saw their female partners as intrusive, both partners experienced lower relationship quality. Overall, men's perceptions of their partners' interpersonal problems were fairly consistently associated with both women's and men's relationship functioning, whereas women's partner-perceptions were primarily associated only with men's satisfaction and quality.

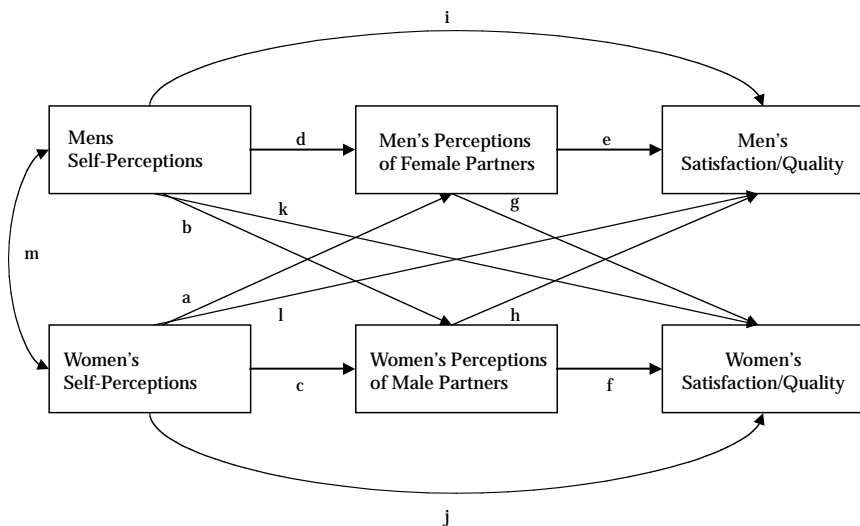
### Across-couple analyses of perceptual processes

Across-couples analyses will be presented first, followed by analyses based on within-couple variables. Again, across-couple analyses are based on the mean level of problems (overall and for the eight subscales), whereas within-couple analyses are based on the relative descriptiveness of interpersonal problems across all items (independent of the mean level of problems).

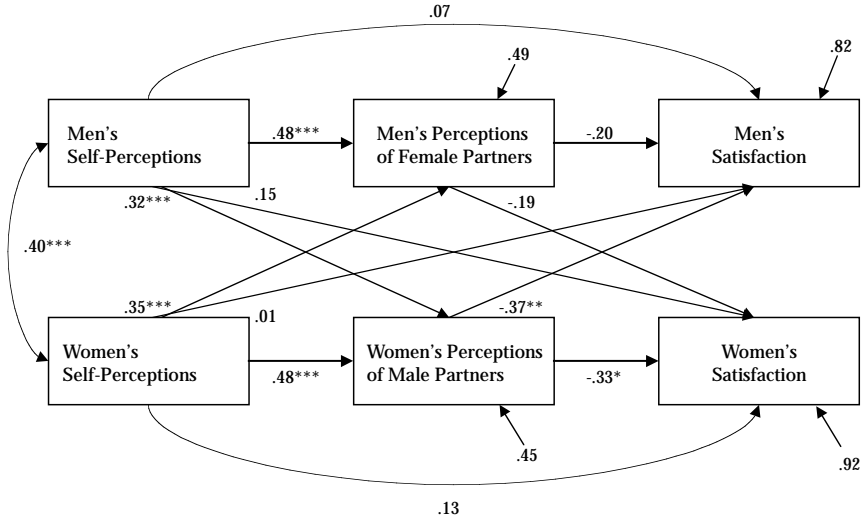
**Path analysis.** Figure 1 depicts the path model used to assess understanding, projection, and positive perceptions of interpersonal problems across couples. The results for the mean level of problems will be presented in two separate path models: Figure 2 for relationship satisfaction and Figure 3 for relationship quality. Similarity (path *m*) is controlled for in all analyses. For the mean level of problems, similarity across partners was .40,  $p < .001$ . At the subscale level, similarity ranged from  $-.03$  to  $.31$  and was significant on only three of the subscales (the vindictive, cold, and overly nurturant subscales; the mean significant association was  $.27$ ).

**Understanding.** Before assessing understanding across couples, simple agreement was assessed. Agreement was assessed by the association between individuals' self-perceptions and their partners' perceptions of them; similarity was not controlled for in the agreement correlations. Agreement on women's mean

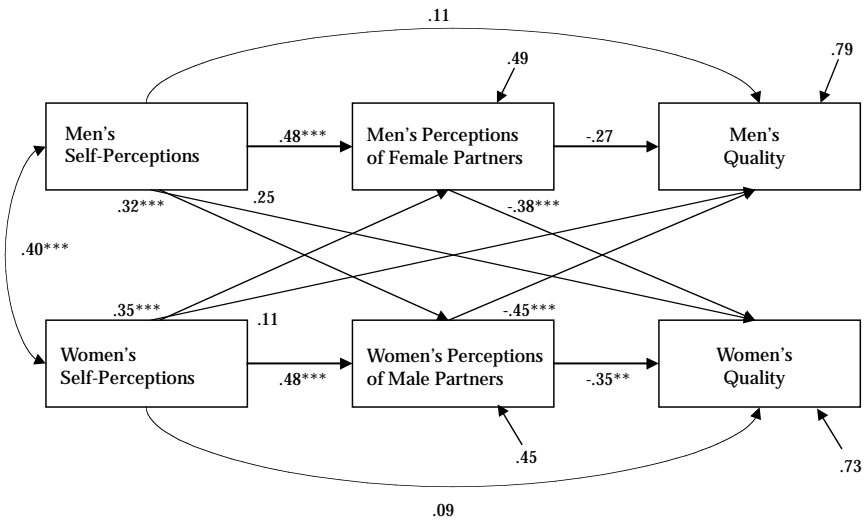
**FIGURE 1**  
**Path model for self- and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning.**



**FIGURE 2**  
**Path model for self- and partner-perceptions of mean level of problems and relationship satisfaction.** *Note.* Values are path coefficients.  $GFI_{(satisf)} = .89$ .  
 $*p < .05$ ;  $**p < .01$ ;  $***p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 3**  
**Path model for self- and partner-perceptions of mean level of problems and relationship quality.** *Note.* Values are path coefficients.  $GFI_{(quality)} = .91$ .  
 $*p < .05$ ;  $**p < .01$ ;  $***p < .001$ .



level of problems was .55 ( $p < .001$ ), and on men's mean level of problems was .51 ( $p < .001$ ). Agreement on women's problems on the subscales ranged from .38 to .65 ( $ps < .001$ ), with the exception of domineering problems ( $r = .18, ns$ ). Agreement on men's problems on the eight subscales ranged from .37 to .57 ( $ps < .001$ ). Paths *a* and *b* in Figure 1 depict understanding across couples. In contrast to the agreement correlations, understanding was assessed by partial correlations that controlled for similarity. With one exception, all values of understanding across couples on the mean level of problems ( $pr = .35$  for women and .32 for men, Figures 2 and 3) and the subscales (see Table 4) were significant at the .01 alpha level, indicating that there was a moderate degree of understanding of interpersonal problems across couples in this sample.

**Understanding and relationship functioning.** Although the path model assessed the degree to which understanding exists, it did not test whether understanding is associated with relationship functioning. Therefore, to assess the association between understanding across couples and relationship functioning, we calculated difference scores that represented the discrepancy between individuals' self-perceptions and their partners' perceptions of them. Difference scores were calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between individuals' self-perceptions and their partners' perception of them. These difference scores were then correlated with satisfaction and quality, while controlling for actual similarity (calculated as an absolute value difference score between men's self-perceptions and women's self-perceptions). For the mean level of problems and the eight subscales, only 7 of 72 correlations measuring the association between understanding of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning were significant ( $ps < .05$ ). With one exception, there were no apparent patterns across the significant correlations. However, women's understanding of men's problems with coldness predicted both partners' relationship quality and men's satisfaction.

**Projection.** Before investigating projection across couples, the association between individuals' self-perceptions and their perceptions of their partners was assessed. This association was labeled *perceived similarity*, as *actual similarity* was not controlled for. The correlations between self-perceptions of mean level of problems and perceptions of partners' mean level of problems was strong for women ( $r = .61, p < .001$ ) and men ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ). At the scale level, women perceived similarity between their own problems and those of their partners on only two of the eight subscales: Cold ( $r(76) = .23, p < .05$ ) and Overly Nurturant ( $r(76) = .30, p < .01$ ). In contrast, men perceived similarity between themselves and their partners on five of the eight subscales: Domineering, Competitive, Cold, Overly Nurturant, and Intrusive ( $rs(76)$  ranged from .28 to .43,  $ps < .05$ ).

In Figure 1, paths *c* and *d* represent projection across couples. Women and men projected their mean level of problems onto their partners, suggesting that when individuals saw themselves as having more problems, they also tended to see their partners as having more problems ( $pr = .48$  for men and .48 for women, Figures 2 and 3). However, they did not generally see their partners as having the same kinds of problems as themselves (Table 4).

**Projection and relationship functioning.** The path model did not assess whether projection was associated with relationship functioning. Therefore, in a similar manner to understanding, difference scores were used to test for an association

**TABLE 4**  
**Projection and understanding on the eight IIP-C scales**

Scale	Coefficient
<b>Domineering</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.17
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.53***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.15
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.28**
<b>Vindictive</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.37**
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.45**
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.06
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.18
<b>Cold</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.44***
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.45***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.12
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.18
<b>Socially avoidant</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.60***
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.57***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	-.01
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	-.04
<b>Nonassertive</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.64***
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.46***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	-.07
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.08
<b>Exploitable</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.60***
Men's self-perception and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.53***
Women's self-perception and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.11
Men's self-perception and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	-.01
<b>Overly-nurturant</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.31***
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.44***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.19
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.36***
<b>Intrusive</b>	
Women's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (und, path a)	.46***
Men's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (und, path b)	.38***
Women's self-perceptions and women's partner-perceptions (proj, path c)	.14
Men's self-perceptions and men's partner-perceptions (proj, path d)	.26**

*Note.* Values are path coefficients;  $N = 76$ ; und = understanding; proj = projection.

\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed.

between projection and relationship satisfaction and quality. Difference scores were calculated as the absolute value of the difference between individuals' self-perceptions and their partner-perceptions. The difference scores were then correlated with the two outcome variables, satisfaction and quality, while

controlling for similarity (the absolute value of the difference between both partners' self-perceptions). For the mean level of problems and the eight subscales, only 5 of 72 correlations that assessed the association between projection of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning were significant ( $ps < .05$ ). Women's projection of their problems with coldness predicted both partners' relationship qualities. Otherwise, similar to understanding, there was no distinct pattern across these correlations.

**Positive perceptions.** We compared how individuals viewed themselves and how their partners viewed them on levels of interpersonal problems. Exploring mean differences allows one to test for a systematic bias in evaluation: Are partners viewed more negatively, in a similar light, or more positively than they see themselves? Paired samples *t*-tests indicated that women viewed their partners as having significantly fewer interpersonal problems than men perceived themselves to have (see Table 1). This pattern was present for the overall level of problems and for five of the eight subscales ( $ps < .001$ ). Men, in contrast, viewed their partners as positively as women viewed themselves; there were no significant differences in perceptions. Thus, women, on average, appeared to hold overly positive perceptions of their partners, whereas men did not.

**Positive perceptions and relationship functioning.** Paths *e* and *f* in Figure 1 index the association between the perceptions individuals held of their partners and their own satisfaction and quality. The more positive the women's perceptions of their partners (i.e., the fewer interpersonal problems they saw men as possessing), the higher their relationship satisfaction (Figure 2) and relationship quality (Figure 3). In contrast, men's positive perceptions of their partners' mean level of problems did not predict their own relationship satisfaction or quality. Paths *g* and *h* assess whether the perceptions individuals hold of their partners are associated with their partners' relationship functioning. Women's tendency to view their partners positively was associated with their male partners' satisfaction (Figure 2) and relationship quality (Figure 3). Men's positive perceptions of their partners' mean level of problems was not significantly associated with women's satisfaction, but was significantly associated with women's relationship quality.

Table 5 shows that holding positive perceptions of problems with coldness consistently predicted both partners' satisfaction and quality. As well, there were significant associations for positive perceptions of problems corresponding to the domineering and vindictive subscales.

**Self-perceptions: An independent contribution?** We examined whether self-perceptions predicted relationship satisfaction after controlling for actual similarity and partner-perceptions. In other words, did self-perceptions of interpersonal problems independently predict relationship functioning?

Women's and men's self-perceptions on the mean level of problems did not independently predict their own satisfaction or quality (paths *i* and *j* in Figure 1, Figures 2 and 3), or their partners' satisfaction or quality (paths *l* and *k* in Figure 1, Figures 2 and 3). At the subscale level, self-perceptions did not independently predict individuals' own or partners' relationship functioning for most of the eight subscales (see Table 5). Taken together, these results suggest that, whereas certain self-perceptions were associated with relationship functioning, these associations were largely mediated by partner-perceptions.

**TABLE 5**  
**Path analyses for the eight IIP-C scales**

Scale	Female outcome		Male outcome	
	Satisfaction	Quality	Satisfaction	Quality
<b>Domineering</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	-.20	.02	-.16	-.08
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	.09	.16	.07	.14
Women's partner-perceptions <sup>a</sup> (paths f and h)	-.17	-.52**	-.17	-.21
Men's partner-perceptions <sup>b</sup> (paths e and g)	-.27*	-.29**	-.33***	-.48***
<b>Vindictive</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	-.13	-.04	-.11	-.06
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	.16	.12	.02	.18
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.21	-.46***	-.17	-.31***
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.23	-.37***	-.40***	-.36***
<b>Cold</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	-.06	.03	-.04	.07
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	.20	.16	-.04	.06
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.34***	-.57***	-.35***	-.48***
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.37***	-.36***	-.37***	-.29**
<b>Socially avoidant</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	-.04	-.22	-.03	-.03
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	.27*	.27*	.15	.07
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.21	-.39***	-.25	-.31*
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.06	-.25	-.29*	-.02
<b>Nonassertive</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	.05	-.07	-.04	.22
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	.11	.11	.06	.00
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.23	-.20	-.31**	-.25*
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.07	-.30	-.13	-.33*
<b>Exploitable</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	-.01	-.42***	-.23	-.05
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	-.15	-.09	-.06	.01
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.08	-.01	-.23	-.33**
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	.10	.16	.19	-.02
<b>Overly-nurturant</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	.11	-.28*	-.04	-.10
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	-.06	-.19	-.10	-.21
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.22	-.01	-.35***	-.18
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.06	.17	.26*	.08
<b>Intrusive</b>				
Women's self-perceptions (paths j and l)	.00	-.19	-.22	-.19
Men's self-perceptions (paths i and k)	-.11	-.01	-.15	-.05
Women's partner-perceptions (paths f and h)	-.05	-.11	-.12	-.11
Men's partner-perceptions (paths e and g)	-.01	-.21	-.03	-.20

Note. Numbers represent path coefficients; *N* = 76.

<sup>a</sup>Women's partner-perceptions refers to women's perceptions of men.

<sup>b</sup>Men's partner-perceptions refers to men's perceptions of women.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001, two-tailed.

**Interactive effects of interpersonal problems and relationship functioning.**

The path model did not test for interactive effects of men's and women's self-perceptions, or men's and women's partner-perceptions. Interactive effects would indicate that, in addition to the unique contributions each member makes to the relationship, there are also multiplicative effects. For example, it may be that couples were particularly unhappy if both partners had a high level

of interpersonal problems. Interactions were tested using multiple regression. For each problem scale, men's self-perceptions, women's self-perceptions, and the interaction term (the product of men's self-perceptions and women's self-perceptions) were entered into the regression equation (all variables were centered). Interactions were assessed four times, predicting each of the relationship outcome variables. The same process was repeated for partner-perceptions. These two sets of analyses (self- and partner-perceptions) were conducted for the mean level of problems and for the eight subscales. Of the 72 analyses, only five of the interactions were significant; however, there was no pattern across subscales or outcomes.

### Analyses of perceptual processes based on within-couple variables

**Understanding.** Before assessing within-couple understanding, within-couple agreement on the 64 problem items was calculated. Agreement correlations on women's problems ranged from  $-.09$  to  $.78$  ( $M = .35$ ,  $SD = .21$ ), and agreement correlations on men's problems ranged from  $-.05$  to  $.70$  ( $M = .34$ ,  $SD = .18$ ). Within-couple understanding was calculated by the convergence between an individual's self-perception and his or her partner's perception of him or her, controlling for the partner's self-perception, across the 64 interpersonal problems assessed (cf. Murray et al., 1996). The correlations for men's understanding of women ranged from  $-.08$  to  $.79$  ( $M = .33$ ,  $SD = .20$ ) and the correlations for women's understanding of men ranged from  $-.05$  to  $.71$  ( $M = .33$ ,  $SD = .17$ ). These findings confirm a moderate level of understanding, while also indicating substantial couple variation in degree of understanding.

**Understanding and relationship functioning.** To investigate whether understanding based on within-couple variables predicted relationship functioning, the understanding correlation index was correlated with relationship satisfaction and quality. Men's understanding of women was not associated with their own satisfaction ( $r(76) = -.01$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = -.06$ ), or their female partners' satisfaction ( $r(76) = .06$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .10$ ). Similarly, women's understanding of men's problems was not associated with their own satisfaction ( $r(76) = .00$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = -.10$ ), nor their male partners' satisfaction ( $r(76) = .14$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .03$ ).

**Projection.** Before assessing projection based on within-couple variables, within-couple perceived similarity was assessed. Men's perceived similarity ranged from  $-.57$  to  $.53$  ( $M = .10$ ,  $SD = .25$ ) and women's perceived similarity ranged from  $-.37$  to  $.50$  ( $M = .09$ ,  $SD = .25$ ). Within-couple projection was assessed by a correlation index derived from the correlation of an individual's self-perception and his or her perception of his or her partner across all problem items, controlling for similarity. The correlations for men's projection of problems onto their female partners ranged from  $-.57$  to  $.61$  ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .23$ ), and the correlations for women's projection of problems onto their male partners ranged from  $-.35$  to  $.65$  ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .24$ ), suggesting little evidence of projection on specific problems. There was, however, substantial couple variation in degree of projection.

**Projection and relationship functioning.** The projection correlation index was also correlated with relationship satisfaction and quality. Men's projection of

their problems onto their partners was not associated with their own satisfaction ( $r(76) = .11$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .14$ ), or their partners' satisfaction ( $r(76) = -.02$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .07$ ). Similarly, women's projection of their problems onto their partners was not associated with their own satisfaction ( $r(76) = .12$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .11$ ), or their partners' satisfaction ( $r(76) = .10$ ) or quality ( $r(76) = .14$ ).

**A comparison of across-couple and within-couple results.** Figures 2 and 3 indicate that partner-perceptions of the mean level of problems were comprised in part of understanding and in part of projection. It is interesting to note that projection accounted for at least as much variance in partner-perceptions as did understanding. Whereas there was little evidence of projection of specific interpersonal problems, understanding existed at the scale level to a substantial degree (see Table 4). These two findings were corroborated by the correlation index results: On average, within couples, there was no projection of specific problems, whereas there was a moderate degree of understanding. In addition, there was little evidence that projection or understanding of problems predicted relationship functioning in either of the analytic approaches.

## Discussion

Although partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems predicted relationship functioning more strongly and consistently than self-perceptions, self-perceptions were associated with relationship functioning. Women's positive self-perceptions of the mean level of problems were associated with their own relationship quality and their male partners' relationship satisfaction. Men's self-perceptions of their mean level of problems were associated with their own relationship satisfaction and quality, but not their female partners' satisfaction and quality. At the subscale level, it appeared that women's self-perceptions were most important for hostile-dominant problems – those characterized by the domineering, vindictive, and cold subscales. The problems assessed by these subscales are likely to bring the most difficulties when interacting. For example, wanting to get revenge against others too much (vindictive) and trying to control others too much (domineering) could be more problematic for a relationship than being too easily persuaded by people (exploitable) or having difficulty being self-confident when with other people (nonassertive). There was a consistent pattern of negative associations between women's self-perceptions of interpersonal problems and their own relationship quality. In contrast, men's self-perceptions of interpersonal problems did not predict satisfaction consistently. Overall, it appeared that self-perceptions on their own played a role in relationship functioning, although the findings were not consistent across all subscales or outcomes. These results are consistent with work in the attachment field (e.g., Cobb et al., 2001) and personality field (Robins et al., 2000), where self-perceptions have been found to somewhat predict relationship functioning.

It is interesting to note some sex patterns that emerged in the associations between self-perceptions and relationship functioning. First,

women's self-reports of interpersonal problems consistently predicted their own relationship quality, whereas men's self-reports of interpersonal problems did not predict their own relationship quality. This pattern might suggest that women's characteristic interpersonal styles have more impact on the quality of their relationships than do men's. However, if so, we would expect the same pattern to hold for relationship satisfaction, which was not the case. It is also possible that in the Peer Attachment Interview (from which the quality rating was derived) women were more prone to discuss interpersonal difficulties than were men, and/or that coders were more influenced in their ratings by women's interpersonal problems than by men's problems. Findings also suggested that when women were higher on domineering, vindictive, and cold interpersonal problems (according to self- and partner-reports), their male partners were less satisfied. These three scales represent problems that are 'instrumental' (i.e., masculine) in nature. In contrast, women's interpersonal problems on the 'expressive' (i.e., feminine) scales were not generally associated with their male partners' satisfaction.

In comparison to self-perceptions, partner-perceptions were associated with relationship functioning more strongly and more consistently. The importance of partner-perceptions in predicting relationship functioning also has been shown in areas such as interpersonal traits (Murray et al., 1996) and attachment (Cobb et al., 2001; Ruvolo & Fabian, 1999). Although self-perceptions of interpersonal problems were somewhat associated with relationship functioning, these associations were largely mediated by partner-perceptions (both the perceptions individuals hold of their partners, and the perceptions their partners hold of them). This finding is consistent with Cobb et al. (2001), who found that the association between self-perceptions of attachment style and relationship functioning was mediated by partner-perceptions. Murray et al. (1996) found similar results for self-perceptions of interpersonal traits.

Understanding of interpersonal problems existed to a moderate degree. There was understanding on the mean level of problems, as well as on all of the problem subscales except for one. However, level of understanding did not predict relationship functioning. This result is consistent with some research looking at understanding of attachment and self-attributes in dating couples (Swann et al., 1994; Tucker & Anders, 1999), as well as research looking at understanding of interpersonal traits in both dating and married couples (e.g., Murray et al., 1996). In contrast, Swann et al. (1994) found that understanding of self-attributes predicted relationship functioning in married couples, and Kobak and Hazan (1991) found that agreement (not controlling for similarity) on attachment patterns in married couples predicted relationship satisfaction. In order to investigate whether married couples in our sample evidenced similar findings to Swann et al. and Kobak and Hazan, we ran the analyses after breaking down the sample into two groups: dating and married/cohabiting. Consistent with the majority of research in the field, we failed to document evidence that understanding predicts satisfaction in married couples.

Although reasoning was presented in the introduction to suggest why understanding of interpersonal problems may predict relationship functioning, a case for why understanding of problems may not be important can also be made. It was suggested earlier that empathy and an awareness of partners' interpersonal problems could facilitate interaction, possibly preventing conflict. Empathy and awareness may not be enough to predict satisfaction, however. Instead, whether individuals feel that their partners are making a concerted effort to confront their problems may be most important. Future research could investigate whether individuals' perceptions of their partners' likelihood for change and progress on interpersonal problems (dually recognized in one couple member) moderate the association between understanding and relationship functioning. Also, it may be that *perceived* understanding (based on how individuals think their partners see them), rather than *actual* understanding (based on how individuals are seen by their partners), is more important for relationship functioning (Katz, Anderson, & Beach, 1997).

Projection occurred to a moderate degree on the mean level of problems. In other words, the higher the level of problems individuals saw themselves as having, the higher the level of problems they perceived their partner as having as well. However, there was little evidence that either men or women projected their specific problems onto their partners. In addition, projection did not predict relationship functioning for either couple member. These results stand in contrast to some prior research. In the attachment field, there is evidence that projection (e.g., Ruvolo & Fabian, 1999) and perceived similarity (e.g., Hammond & Fletcher, 1991) are associated with relationship functioning. However, attachment tends to be specific to intimate relationships, whereas most interpersonal problems are applicable across interaction partners. It may be that, because interpersonal problems are less relationship specific, projection of problems may not be important in relationship functioning.

Women's positive perceptions of their partners' interpersonal problems predicted both partners' relationship satisfaction and quality. The degree to which men viewed their partners positively was associated only with women's relationship quality. In contrast, Cobb et al. (2001) found significant associations for both women and men. We are hesitant to interpret the sex discrepancy in findings for men because Cobb et al. (2001) had a larger sample than the current study and they reported significant coefficients of similar magnitude to those found in the current study. However, most other research has assessed positive perceptions by pooling across sex (e.g., Murray et al., 1996) – a process that estimates common path coefficients for each sex. Consistent with prior research, when we compared pooled and nonpooled path models, we found no support for sex differences and pooled paths were significant.

Viewing partners positively may serve a relationship-enhancing function by encouraging individuals to live up to the ideals their partners hold of them (Murray et al., 1996). Further, positive perceptions may act as a buffer allowing individuals to commit to their partners with minimal anxiety

despite their partners' true imperfections (Murray et al., 1996). From an attachment perspective, idealizing a partner's ability to meet one's own interpersonal needs (e.g., seeing a partner as not having difficulty getting close with others when the problem is characteristic) could promote feelings of security in a relationship, thereby enhancing relationship functioning.

It is possible that partners may be particularly unhappy if both individuals have a high level of problems or if both partners see each other as having a high level of problems. Therefore, we assessed whether self- and partner-perceptions interacted to predict relationship functioning. Interactions were conducted for the mean level of problems, in addition to the eight subscales. With only a few exceptions, there were no significant interaction effects for male and female self-perceptions of interpersonal problems, or male and female partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems. These findings are consistent with other research (e.g., Robins et al., 2000). However, nonsignificant interactions for self- and partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems do not suggest that couples need only be studied on the individual level. As discussed, partner-perceptions strongly predicted relationship functioning, and the associations between self-perceptions and relationship functioning were largely mediated by partner-perceptions. In addition, positive perceptions of partners' interpersonal problems were associated with relationship functioning. These findings highlight the importance and necessity of considering the couple as a functional unit even if there is no evidence of multiplicative effects.

### **Strengths, limitations, and conclusions**

The current sample was comprised of couples in established relationships with a mean relationship length of four years and a minimum length of two years, whereas most research has considered either short-term dating couples or married couples. Future research needs to extend to the investigation of perceptions of interpersonal problems in short-term dating and longer term marital relationships. It would also be useful to derive problem ratings from individuals who know the couple members well (e.g., close friends, family members) to provide an external perception index (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Dolderman, 2000). Such ratings would allow one to investigate whether there are differences in perceptions across various types of relationships. Moreover, multiple ratings of one individual could be used to form an aggregate that could then serve as a more valid benchmark from which to compare partner ratings.

Previous research in this field has tended to rely on self-reports to evaluate relationship functioning. A problem with self-reported relationship satisfaction is evident from the mean ratings of satisfaction that were seen in this study. On average, participants rated their relationship satisfaction only about one point below the highest possible rating. When there is such a restriction of range, it may be difficult to detect the associations between various factors and relationship functioning. A strength of this study is that relationship functioning was also assessed by expert ratings of relationship

quality. For the most part, results based on the expert ratings of relationship quality were consistent with those based on self-reported satisfaction, providing greater confidence in the pattern of findings. Further, the findings based on relationship quality were more consistent than those based on self-reported satisfaction, even though the quality findings involved associations across methods. This highlights the importance of assessing relationship functioning through means other than self-reports.

Another methodological strength of this study is that it assessed understanding and projection both across couples (a nomothetic approach) and within couples (an idiographic approach). The within-couple correlation indexes for understanding and projection are independent of the mean level of problems and further are independent of response biases for both self- and partner-reports. The within-couple analyses for understanding and projection corroborated those derived from across-couple analyses, providing greater confidence in the findings.

The path model tested in this study was developed based on previous research that has typically investigated whether self- and partner-perceptions predict relationship functioning (e.g., Cobb et al., 2001; Murray et al., 1996). It is also feasible that satisfaction could lead to more positive partner-perceptions and self-perceptions. Longitudinal data would be useful to uncover the causal relation among these variables and to investigate the long-term impact of self- and partner-perceptions on relationship functioning.

In conclusion, the current research highlights the importance of considering the perceptions individuals hold of their partners' interpersonal problems. Partner-perceptions of interpersonal problems were associated with relationship satisfaction and quality. Further, when self-perceptions were associated with relationship functioning, these associations were largely mediated by partner-perceptions. Finally, this study indicates that positive perceptions of partners' interpersonal problems may be important to relationship satisfaction and quality.

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