Inferring a Partner's Ideal Discrepancies: Accuracy, Projection, and the Communicative Role of Interpersonal Behavior

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Guided by the ideal standards model (Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001), we tested in 2 studies whether (a) individuals were accurate when inferring how closely they matched their romantic partner's ideal standards, (b) such accurate inferences explained why people are more satisfied when they more closely match their partner's ideals, and (c) accurate inferences are generated via the partner's behavior during conflict interactions. Both members of dating and/or married couples were recruited for each study. In both studies, people's inferences into how closely they matched their partner's ideals were based on a blend of accuracy and projection processes. Individuals were also less satisfied when they failed to match their partner's ideal standards (as rated by their partner), and, as predicted, this effect was mediated by people's accurate inferences regarding how closely they matched their partner's ideals. In Study 2, spouses were also video-recorded while they attempted to resolve an important marital conflict. As predicted, Partner A's prediscussion ideal discrepancies predicted pre- to postdiscussion changes in Partner B's inferences, and this effect was partly mediated by the observed interpersonal behaviors of Partner A. Results from these dyadic data analyses suggest that people do have accurate insight into the extent to which they match their partner's ideal standards, and these inferences are generated, in part, by the way the partner behaves toward the self during diagnostic conflict interactions.

Keywords: ideal discrepancies, accuracy, projection, relationship satisfaction, behavior

A quintessential and defining feature of a close relationship is that partners influence each other's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Kelley et al., 1983). This notion figures prominently in the ideal standards model (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001). Research guided by the ideal standards model has demonstrated that people are more satisfied not only when they perceive their partners as closely matching their own ideal standards (an actor effect; Fletcher et al., 1999) but also when they match the ideal standards held by their partner (a partner effect; Campbell et al., 2001; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). This partner effect implies that individuals' satisfaction with their relationship may, at least to some degree, be associated with an accurate assessment of how closely they compare to their partner's ideals. In contrast, prior research examining people's inference of their partner's assessment of the self have argued, and empirically demonstrated, that such inferences are biased by individuals' own self-evaluations (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000) or perceptions of the partner and relationship (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008). However, because personal well-being and desired outcomes depend on the actions and continued investment of the partner (Kelley et al., 1983), people should be strongly motivated to make accurate judgments of their partner's evaluations.

The focus of the current research is to examine whether and how partners make accurate inferences regarding where they stand in relation to their partner's ideal standards. We first predicted that the inferences individuals make regarding how closely they match their partner's ideals should closely track how much they actually match their partner's ideals, and these inferences should play a central role in explaining why people are more satisfied when they more closely match their partner's ideals (Studies 1 and 2). Second, we predicted that the partner's behavior during diagnostic relationship contexts should offer powerful signals of the degree to

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which the self is fulfilling the partner's expectations. Accordingly, the way the partner behaves toward the self during diagnostic conflict interactions should be linked with the degree to which the self matches the partner's ideals, and the partner's behavior should lead to associated changes in individuals' inferences regarding how closely they match their partner's ideals (Study 2).

Ideal Standards Model

The ideal standards model (ISM; see Simpson et al., 2001) blends ideas from evolutionary theories of mate selection (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) and social cognition (e.g., Higgins, 1987) by positing three dimensions of partner ideal standards—warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources—that operate as chronically accessible knowledge structures influencing judgments and decisions in romantic relationships. Recent research has demonstrated that this three-dimensional structure replicates well across sex, relationship status, and short-term versus long-term relationship contexts (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007; Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Overall et al., 2006).

The ISM proposes that ideals along these dimensions serve as standards against which perceptions of current partners or relationships are compared. For instance, participants who report smaller discrepancies between their partner and ideals (i.e., those who perceive that their partner more closely matches their ideal standards) also report higher relationship quality (e.g., satisfaction, intimacy, commitment; Fletcher et al., 1999), and these effects remain robust when the attractiveness of alternative partners is statistically controlled. Smaller ideal discrepancies at the outset of a relationship (approximately three weeks after the relationship started) also predict greater relationship satisfaction 12 months later (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000a). Levels of initial satisfaction do not predict the size of ideal discrepancies later in the relationship, however, suggesting that discrepancies play a causal role in shaping relationship evaluations over time (Fletcher et al., 2000a).

In addition to being linked to important individual-level outcomes, ideal discrepancies are involved in several processes operating at the dyadic level. For example, Campbell et al. (2001) used a couples sample to demonstrate that relationship satisfaction is independently predicted by both partners' ideal discrepancies. That is, when Partner A reports that Partner B is not meeting his or her ideals, both Partner A and Partner B report lower relationship satisfaction (see also Overall et al., 2006). The presence of this partner effect shows that individuals are less satisfied when they fail to meet their partner's ideals (as reported by their partner), but how this link is established has not been the focus of empirical research. In the current research, we propose and test a conceptual model, presented in Figure 1, that highlights a central element of understanding this partner effect involves the inferences people make regarding how closely they are meeting their partner's ideals. We call this element *inferred partner's discrepancies*. The importance of this construct is discussed below.

Inferring the Partner's Evaluation of the Self

Recent theoretical and empirical developments focus on the importance of people's inferences regarding how their partner evaluates the self. The perceived partner responsiveness model (a recently proposed organizing framework for relationship science; Reis, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) highlights that perceptions of partner responsiveness—how much the partner is likely to be responsive to one's needs now and in the future—rests on beliefs about the partner's understanding of aspects of the self (e.g., one's qualities, opinions, needs, goals); beliefs about how much a partner values the self; and beliefs about how supportive a partner is toward the self (Reis, 2007; Reis et al., 2004). The perceived partner responsiveness framework is important because it integrates a variety of perspectives, constructs, and measurements to highlight a core dyadic process; namely, the relationship outcomes of romantic partners are powerfully shaped by how one partner infers he or she is perceived by the other and vice versa. For example, perceiving that one's partner values and supports the self is linked with positive relationship outcomes such as positive affect (Oishi, Koo, & Akimoto, 2008; Oishi, Lun, & Sherman, 2007), higher relationship satisfaction (Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007), and the promotion of communal relationship behavior (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Moreover, a detailed body of work by Sandra Murray and John Holmes (see Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006) has shown that perceptions of the partner's regard guides reactions to relationship-threatening events, particularly events in which the risk of rejection is high. Intimates who perceive that their partner regards them positively

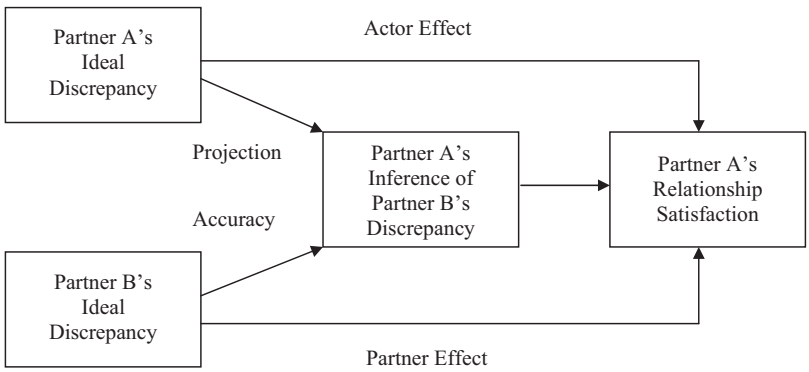

Figure 1. Conceptual model: Inferences of partner's ideal discrepancies as a mediator for the partner effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction.

typically cope with relationship difficulties in a constructive manner by trying to restore closeness, whereas individuals who possess negative perceptions of their partner's regard protect themselves from expected rejection by devaluing and withdrawing from their partner.

Our concept of inferred ideal discrepancies—inferences regarding the degree to which the partner perceives the self to match his or her ideal standards—also captures judgments regarding how the partner perceives or values the self, but it narrows in on the specific attributes and the standards people use to evaluate partners in relationships. Prior measures of perceived regard, such as those used by Murray and colleagues, ask participants to rate how positively their partner views them on important interpersonal qualities, such as "kind and affectionate" and "patient." Murray and colleagues' rationale for this measure is that the common diagnostic that affords security in the partner's regard is the perception that a partner values the qualities the participant brings into the relationship (for more details, see Murray & Holmes, 2009, p. 914; Murray et al., 2006, pp. 643–644). We agree. However, as outlined by the ISM, partners' evaluations of each other are determined not only by the overall positivity or negativity of perceptions (e.g., how much the partner is perceived to be "kind and affectionate") but also by the degree to which specific traits are desired or expected (e.g., the expected or ideal level of "kind and affectionate").

As described above, prior research testing the ISM has shown that when perceptions do not match ideal standards—that is, partner ideal discrepancies exist—people are less satisfied and they try to change their partners (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000a; Overall et al., 2006). Importantly, this research has also shown that partner ideal discrepancies uniquely predict relationship quality, desired relationship change, and attempts to change above and beyond simple positive or negative perceptions of the partner or the level of ideal standards (i.e., controlling for perceptions of the partner and ideal standards; Fletcher et al., 1999; Overall et al., 2006). Thus, inferred ideal discrepancies assess perceptions of the partner's regard and valuing of the self by capturing a key process involving both the partner's perceptions and the partner's ideal standards that underpins partner evaluations.

Moreover, extending the work on general perceptions of the partner's regard, prior research examining ISM processes has shown that inferred ideal discrepancies have an important role in shaping relationship satisfaction, self-regulation behavior, and self-evaluations over time (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001; Lackenbauer & Campbell, 2012; Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006). The more people infer that they are falling below their partner's standards, the less satisfied people are in their relationships, and this damaging effect occurs independently of individuals' own partner ideal discrepancies (i.e., how much their partner is matching their own ideal standards), their own self perceptions of evaluated qualities, and their global self-esteem. Greater inferred ideal discrepancies also motivate individuals to try and change aspects of themselves they perceive are not living up to their partner's expectations and predict reductions in individuals' self perceptions and self-esteem across time. And, as before, these effects occur above and beyond global partner and relationship perceptions.

Inferred ideal discrepancies are also likely to account for how the partner's actual ideal discrepancies undermine individuals' relationship evaluations. As shown in Figure 1, our conceptual model suggests that inferred ideal discrepancies mediate the link between the partner's ideal discrepancies and the individuals' perceived relationship quality. This model rests on the assumption, however, that individuals' inferences regarding their partner's ideal discrepancies are accurate (i.e., inferred ideal discrepancies are directly related to or predicted by the partner's ideal discrepancies).[1] We consider the soundness of this assumption next.

The Accuracy of Inferred Ideal Discrepancies

Inferences into a partner's regard or responsiveness toward the self have been found to be based on a blend of accuracy and bias processes (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2000). In particular, individuals' inferences of their partner's view of the self are based on or predicted by partner's actual reported views of the self (illustrating accuracy) as well as independent factors that stem from motivated reasoning processes or anchoring inferences of the partner's perceptions on the individuals' own self perceptions (revealing bias). For example, individuals with chronically low self-esteem possess more negative perceptions of the partner's regard, even when controlling for the partner's actual regard (i.e., accuracy), indicating that self-evaluations bias inferences of the partner's regard (Murray et al., 2000). These negatively biased perceptions, in turn, lead to greater dissatisfaction with the partner. In contrast, people with high self-esteem possess more positive perceptions of their partner's regard, which tends to foster optimistic views of the partner and relationship (Murray et al., 2000).

Processes within the relationship, rather than individual differences, also influence inferences of the partner's regard and responsiveness. For example, individuals' own responsiveness toward their partner, such as reports of how supportive and helpful they are when their partner is in need, influences perceptions regarding the degree to which the partner is responsive toward the self, independent of individual differences like self-esteem, depression, and attachment style (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Examining both members of dating couples, for example, Lemay and Clark (2008) found that intimates' perceptions of their partner's communal responsiveness was more strongly predicted by their own levels of felt communal responsiveness toward the partner than the partner's

[1] *Accuracy* can be defined and measured in two independent ways (see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Funder & Colvin, 1997; Gagné & Lydon, 2004). The strength of the correlation between partner's reported ideal discrepancies and individuals' inferences of those ideal discrepancies indexes profile agreement, or "tracking accuracy," and provides an index of how much inferences of the partner's ideal discrepancies are influenced by or capture the partner's nuanced judgments of the self (see West & Kenny, 2011). Our conceptual model and measurement refer to this type of tracking accuracy, which is consistent with prior research examining biases in perceived regard that we review next, and can be directly compared to the association between individuals' own partner ideal discrepancies and their inferences regarding their partner's ideal discrepancies (called projection). Tracking accuracy is independent of the mean differences between partner's ratings and individuals' inferences (sometimes called mean-level bias; see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010), which capture whether people are underestimating or overestimating the level of their partner's ideal discrepancies, not whether individuals' inferences are informed or influenced by the way the partner is evaluating the self.

actual reported responsiveness. Lemay and Clark argued that people who care strongly for their partner are motivated to see their partner as similarly caring and vice versa. These findings indicate that individuals project their own responsiveness on to judgments of the partner. In terms of the processes we examine in this research, such projection processes should bias inferences regarding the partner's regard for the self and, in particular, inferences regarding how much the partner evaluates the self as matching important ideal standards.

Figure 1 displays how projection processes fit into the current research (see path labeled projection). Here, people's inferences of how closely they are meeting their partner's ideals are, in part, based on how closely they feel their partner meets their own ideal standards. This pattern of social projection in the context of perceptions of the partner's responsiveness has been found to have important implications for relationship outcomes. For example, the links between one's own level of responsiveness and relationship satisfaction are mediated by perceptions of their partner's responsiveness; thus, when people project their responsiveness onto judgments of the partner, this helps to sustain their positive evaluations of the relationship (Lemay et al., 2007). It is important to note, however, that although individuals' own reported responsiveness (i.e., projection) were stronger predictors in Lemay et al.'s models, judgments of the partner's responsiveness were still significantly predicted by the partner's actual reports (i.e., accuracy); thus, these judgments contained at least a kernel of truth.

Indeed, the presence of the partner effect described above implies that people are aware of how closely they are meeting their partner's ideals, despite these judgments also being shaped by projection processes (Simpson et al., 2001). Moreover, there are good reasons why people should and do make accurate assessments of their partner's responsiveness. Panglossian views of one's partner can boost relationship satisfaction and even become self-fulfilling (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009), but being able to gather more accurate information can be critical for diagnosing the health and potential of a relationship (Fletcher, 2002; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Accurate assessments of the partner's evaluations of the self and, thus, continued investment also essentially inform intimates of how safe it is to trust that the partner will continue to accept, care, and value the self in times of threat, such as during conflict or when individuals need support (see Murray et al., 2006). Given the crucial outcomes associated with these judgments (i.e., acceptance vs. rejection), people should not only be motivated to accurately gauge their partner's regard but also be strongly attuned to behavior diagnostic of their partner's evaluations (Overall, Fletcher, & Kenny, 2012).

In line with this reasoning, higher levels of perceived partner responsiveness are related to the partner's actual enactment of more positive and less negative behaviors (Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008). One type of behavior that contains information directly applicable to a partner's assessment of the self is a partner's regulation attempts (i.e., behaviors targeted at changing some aspect of one's partner). Overall et al.'s (2006) research on the regulation function of ideal standards provides evidence that one way by which intimates communicate their regard is by trying to change their partner to become more aligned with the ideal standards they hold for their partner. Overall et al. found that the more individuals were targeted with regulation attempts from their partner, the less they believed that they met their partner's ideals (also see Overall & Fletcher, 2010). These results imply that relationship behaviors communicate to targets how much they are valued by their partner with regard to specific domains of the self. Thus, the presence of behavioral evidence of the partner's regard should inform the accuracy of people's inferences regarding their partner's ideal discrepancies. In sum, the vast majority of research on perceived partner responsiveness has focused on describing and investigating the mechanisms that lead to people making relatively inaccurate inferences of their partner's regard. This has led to a gap in our understanding of how people are able to come to accurately track how their partner evaluates them and how this accuracy is linked to relationship quality. As argued above, individuals should be strongly motivated to make accurate judgments regarding their partner's evaluations. Moreover, this argument particularly applies to characteristics such as warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources, which constitute the pivotal dimensions used to evaluate new or existing romantic partners (Buss, 1989; Fletcher et al., 1999) and the mate value of the self (Fletcher, 2002). Thus, we propose that people are attuned to how their partner views them along the ISM's three dimensions and are therefore relatively accurate in inferring how they match their partner's ideals in these domains. This accuracy link is shown in our conceptual model in Figure 1 (see path labeled accuracy).

Furthermore, a key process in generating accurate inferences should involve updating judgments of the partner's ideal discrepancies when behavioral evidence of those discrepancies is available. Indeed, the pervasiveness of projection processes operating on perceptions of partner responsiveness may partly result from the fact that relationship behaviors are often ambiguous enough that they allow for subjective interpretation (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). In the absence of information gleaned from clear behavioral evidence, inferences of a partner's regard may be strongly influenced or motivated by projection responses, including one's own self perceptions and one's perceptions of the partner. In contrast, inferences of the partner's ideal discrepancies will better reflect the partner's actual ideal discrepancies in situations where the partner exhibits relevant relationship behaviors. We tested this proposition by coding the positive and negative behavior exhibited by couples discussing an unresolved relationship problem. The way the partner behaves toward the self should be tied to the partner's views of the self (i.e., the partner's ideal discrepancies) and should therefore provide diagnostic information of the partner's actual regard. Furthermore, exposure to diagnostic partner behavior during the conflict resolution discussion should lead to corresponding changes in inferred partner's discrepancies, and these changes should be in a direction consistent with the partner's behavior. Intimates whose partner is falling short of their ideal standards (i.e., have larger ideal discrepancies) should exhibit more negative and less positive behavior. In turn, intimates exposed to more negative and less positive behavior should make more negative inferences regarding their partner's discrepancies.

Research Overview

The current research was designed to test two sets of predictions regarding the processes that inform intimates' inferences regarding how much they match their partner's ideal. Our first set of predictions is illustrated in the model in Figure 1. First, the degree to

which individuals match their partner's image of an ideal partner—as rated by their partner—will uniquely predict individuals' relationship satisfaction (the path labeled partner effect). Second, inferences regarding how closely people feel they are meeting their partner's ideal standards will be based on a blend of accuracy and projection processes. Accordingly, inferences of partner's discrepancies will be predicted by individuals' own ideal discrepancies (the projection path) but also their partner's actual ideal discrepancies (the accuracy path). We expect these accuracy and projection processes to operate across all three ideal dimensions. Third, inferences of a partner's ideal discrepancies will mediate the partner effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction. That is, one reason why people's relationship satisfaction is negatively affected when they do not match their partner's ideals (as rated by their partner) is because people accurately assess that they are falling short of their partner's ideals. We tested the model in Figure 1 in two studies by gathering measures of ideal discrepancies, inferred ideal discrepancies, and relationship satisfaction from both members of committed couples.

Our second set of predictions focused on how people come to accurately ascertain how closely they are meeting their partner's ideal standards. In Study 2, couples were observed during a conflict resolution discussion to test our assertion that behaviors enacted by a romantic partner are a source of diagnostic information used by individuals to assess their partner's ideal discrepancies. We expected that exposure to partner behavior diagnostic of the partner's ideal discrepancies would be associated with changes in inferences regarding the partner's ideal discrepancies (from chronic, prediscussion inferences). We also expected that changes in inferred ideal discrepancies would follow the tone of the partner's behavior during the interaction, which should reflect the partner-ideal discrepancies. In particular, larger ideal discrepancies should be associated with a pattern of more negative and less positive behaviors committed by the partner, and thus more negative and less positive partner behaviors should be associated with more negative inferences of the partner's ideal discrepancies (and vice versa).

Study 1

Our purpose in Study 1 was to test the first set of predictions outlined in Figure 1. We recruited a large sample of dating couples from a university community and asked them to complete a number of questionnaires relevant to the study hypotheses.

Method

Participants. A sample of 197 heterosexual couples responded to paper and electronic announcements posted across a New Zealand university and student-based organizations (e.g., employment agencies and health centers). Couples had to be involved for at least one year in committed relationships. The average relationship length was 35.3 months (SD = 27.0 months), and 61% of the couples were either living together or married. Men were, on average, 23.7 years of age (SD = 4.6 years), and women were 22.3 years of age (SD = 3.6 years). Couples were paid NZ$70 for completing a variety of questionnaire-based and observation procedures, including the questionnaires below. This data set was used in Overall, Simpson, and Struthers (2013), but that research did not examine any of the measures or questions addressed in the current research.

Materials.

Ideal discrepancies, ideal importance, and partner perceptions. The short version of the Partner Ideal Scales (Fletcher et al., 1999) was used to measure perceived ideal discrepancies, ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions. Seventeen attributes assessed the three ideal standard dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness (six items; e.g., understanding, considerate, kind), attractiveness/vitality (six items; e.g., nice body, adventurous, sexy), and status/resources (five items; e.g., good job, financially secure, successful).

To assess participants' own partner ideal discrepancies, participants rated each attribute according to the extent to which they perceived their partner matched their ideal standards (anchored 1 = *does not match my ideal at all*, 7 = *completely matches my ideal*). To measure inferred partner's discrepancies, participants rated each attribute according to how much they felt they matched their partner's ideal standards (1 = *I do not match his/her ideal at all*, 7 = *I completely match his/her ideal*). Prior research has shown that these direct measures of partner and inferred discrepancies produce similar associations with outcome variables as indirect measures based on calculating the difference between perceptions and ideal standards (Campbell et al., 2001; Overall et al., 2006). Furthermore, these direct measures of discrepancies predict relationship evaluations and behavior above and beyond partner or self perceptions, ideal importance, and global self and relationship evaluations (Campbell et al., 2001; Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006).

We also collected ideal importance, partner perception, and self-ratings across all three ideal dimensions to demonstrate that the predicted effects were not due to the importance placed on each ideal dimension, the degree to which individuals felt their partner possessed each ideal trait, or the degree to which individuals evaluated themselves to possess each attribute. Ideal importance was measured by asking participants to rate how important each attribute was to them in describing their ideal partner (1 = *very unimportant*, 7 = *extremely important*). Partner perception ratings were measured by asking participants to rate how accurately each attribute described their partner (1 = *not at all like my partner*, 7 = *very much like my partner*). Self perception ratings were measured by asking participants to rate how characteristic each attribute was of them (1 = *not at all characteristic*, 7 = *very characteristic*).

Relationship satisfaction. The short form of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000b) was used to assess relationship quality. This scale includes items assessing satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance. Items were measured on a 7-point scale (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) and were averaged to provide an overall index of relationship quality.

Self-esteem. Global perceptions of self-esteem were assessed with Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale. Responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale (anchored 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). All items were averaged, and the scale was scored such that higher scores reflect higher levels of self-esteem.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities of Study 1 Variables

Variable	*M* (*SD*)		Reliability	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Warmth/trustworthiness				
Ideal discrepancies	5.91 (0.93)	5.79 (0.97)	.87	.86
Inferred partner's discrepancies	5.25 (1.04)	5.50 (0.91)	.87	.82
Ideal importance	6.03 (0.67)	6.26 (0.58)	.76	.74
Partner perceptions	6.01 (0.79)	5.76 (0.91)	.86	.86
Self perceptions	5.57 (0.81)	5.75 (0.78)	.78	.78
Attractiveness/vitality				
Ideal discrepancy	5.75 (1.01)	5.78 (0.78)	.87	.79
Inferred partner's discrepancies	5.47 (0.98)	5.29 (1.10)	.82	.84
Ideal importance	5.42 (0.94)	4.89 (1.01)	.82	.80
Partner perceptions	5.75 (0.88)	5.63 (0.93)	.81	.77
Self perceptions	5.14 (0.78)	4.82 (1.02)	.77	.78
Status/resources				
Ideal discrepancy	5.82 (1.01)	5.47 (1.26)	.88	.88
Inferred partner's discrepancies	5.22 (1.17)	5.61 (1.01)	.85	.84
Ideal importance	4.36 (1.49)	5.15 (1.29)	.89	.88
Partner perceptions	5.66 (1.04)	5.41 1.13)	.81	.83
Self perceptions	5.38 (1.06)	5.44 (1.08)	.83	.85
Relationship quality	6.10 (0.64)	6.04 (0.69)	.83	.82
Self-esteem	5.40 (0.97)	5.11 (1.11)	.85	.90

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of all scales are presented in Table 1.

Procedure. Measures pertinent to the main hypotheses were taken as part of laboratory sessions attended by both relationship partners. Participants completed the questionnaires independently and privately. They were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and not shared with their partners.

Results

The general data analytic approach was guided by the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), which simultaneously estimates actor effects and partner effects. An *actor effect* refers to how one individual's score on a predictor variable is related to that person's score on an outcome variable. In these analyses, the actor effects tested were the degree to which an individual's own partner ideal discrepancies was associated with his or her own evaluations of relationship quality (see Figure 1 labeled actor effect). A *partner effect* refers to how the partner's predictor variable score is related to the individual's score on an outcome variable. In these analyses, the partner effects tested were the degree to which the partner's ideal discrepancies (i.e., how discrepant the individual was from the partner's ideals) was associated with individual's relationship quality (see Figure 1 labeled partner effect). We predicted that both of these paths would be positive and significant.

The actor and partner effects were estimated with a multilevel modeling (MLM) approach and followed procedures suggested by Campbell and Kashy (2002; see also Kenny et al., 2006). Data from each romantic partner were nested within a group with an *N* of 2 (i.e., a dyad). All continuous predictor variables were centered by subtracting the grand mean from each score. Participant sex was effect coded, with women coded as −1 and men coded as 1. In the analyses of both studies, sex was included as a predictor variable. To reduce confusion, we italicize the words *actor* and *partner* when they are being used in the context of the APIM within the Results sections. We ran additional models including control variables to determine if the hypothesized effects remained when the components of discrepancies—ideal standards and partner perceptions—were included as predictors. To ensure we did not unreasonably constrain models due to multicollinearity across variables and partners, we did this by first controlling for the components of discrepancies for actor variables (actor's ratings of ideal importance and partner perceptions) and then, in a separate model, partner variables (partner's ratings of ideal importance and partner perceptions). In the models predicting inferences of partner discrepancies, actor's and partner's self perceptions were also included as control variables, given prior research reporting links between self perceptions and perceived regard. The results of original and control models are presented in each table where appropriate.

Relationship satisfaction and partner's ideal discrepancies. To test for the expected *partner* effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction, we estimated three models (one for each of the ISM's ideal dimensions) with *actor's* and *partner's* ideal discrepancies and sex as predictors, and *actor's* relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable. Results from these three models are presented in Table 2. No main or interactive effects emerged for sex. For each ideal dimension, an *actor* effect emerged showing that individuals were more satisfied with their relationship when they perceived their partners as more closely matching their image of an ideal partner (the *actor* effect path in Figure 1). As expected, there was also a significant *partner* effect on relationship satisfaction (the *partner* effect path in Figure 1). In particular, individuals with partners reporting larger discrepancies on each dimension reported lower relationship satisfaction independently of their own reported discrepancies. Overall, these patterns of results replicate prior research guided by the ISM (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001). Additionally, these results met the first requirement

Table 2
Ideal Discrepancies Predicting Actor Relationship Satisfaction (Study 1)

Dimension	Original model	With actor control variables	With partner control variables
Warmth/trustworthiness			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.36***	.17***	.36***
Partner ideal discrepancies	.14***	.13***	.18***
Ideal importance	—	.10*	−.01
Partner perceptions	—	.24***	−.05
Attractiveness/vitality			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.36***	.26***	.36***
Partner ideal importance	.10***	.09**	.10*
Ideal importance	—	.01	−.04
Partner perceptions	—	.15**	.01
Status/resources			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.25***	.19***	.25***
Partner ideal discrepancies	.09***	.09***	.12***
Ideal importance	—	−.02	−.02
Partner perceptions	—	.10**	−.04

Note. Each model controlled for participant sex. Actor and partner effects refer to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Actor ideal importance and partner perceptions are added as control variables in column 2, and partner ideal importance and partner perceptions are added as control variables in column 3. When a variable was not included in the model, dashes appear in the table in place of coefficients.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

for a test of whether the *partner* effect path in our conceptual model (see Figure 1) is mediated by inferences of a partner's discrepancies for each dimension (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Importantly, these results remain when controlling for the components of both the actor's and partner's discrepancies, and the relative size of the partner effect of ideal discrepancies remains virtually unchanged in the models with control variables (see lefthand columns in Table 2).

Accuracy and projection in inferences of discrepancies. To appropriately assess the independent contribution of projection and accuracy processes in predicting inferences of a partner's ideal discrepancies (i.e., how much the self matches the partner's ideals), one must include both *actor's* and *partner's* ideal discrepancies as simultaneous predictors of the *actor's* inferred discrepancies. Three models were estimated (one for each ideal dimension) with *actor's* ideal discrepancies (projection path), *partner's* ideal discrepancies (accuracy path), and sex as predictor variables and *actor's* inferred discrepancies as the outcome. Thus, in these analyses, projection was represented by how well an *actor's* discrepancies predicted *actor's* inferences of the partner's discrepancies, and accuracy was represented by how well the *partner's* discrepancies predicted *actor's* inferences.

Results from these models are presented in Table 3. Main effects of sex were found for each of the three dimensions: Women inferred more closely matching their partner's warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources ideals, whereas men inferred more closely matching their partner's vitality/attractiveness ideals. However, follow-up analyses testing differences across men and women by using sex as a moderator variable revealed that the projection and accuracy paths did not significantly differ across men and women. As expected, the inferences people make regarding how closely they meet their partner's ideals were significantly predicted by both projection (own ideal discrepancies) and accuracy (the partner's actual ideal discrepancies) processes for each of the three ideal dimensions. This pattern of results satisfies the second requirement for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Moreover, the results were not substantively altered when controlling for the components of both the actor's and partner's discrepancies, as well as self perceptions (see final columns in Table 3).[2] Controlling for actor's self perceptions tended to reduce the size of the projection path consistent with prior research showing judgments of the partner's regard are biased by self evaluations. Self-evaluation biases did not undermine accuracy, however. The accuracy path remained robust across the control analyses, with the exception that the accuracy path for the status/resources dimension became marginally significant when controlling for the partner's control variables, perhaps because actor inferences and partner perceptions are strongly associated due to the more objective evidence of attainment of status/resources qualities (e.g., good job, nice house, financially secure).

Do inferences of partner's discrepancies account for the partner effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction? Thus far, the analyses have shown that, across all three ideal dimensions, individuals reported lower relationship satisfaction when their partner reported individuals were more discrepant from their (the partner's) ideals and that individuals' inferences into their partner's ideal discrepancies were based on projections of their own discrepancies as well as accurate assessments of the partner's ideal discrepancies. Our conceptual model predicts that these inferences into how the partner views the self are an important component in how people evaluate their relationship and thus may partly account for the *partner* effect in the present model. To test whether *actor's* inferences into a *partner's* discrepancies mediated the link between *partner's* discrepancies and an *actor's* relationship satisfaction, we estimated three additional models, one for each dimension, with *actor's* and *partner's* discrepancies, sex, and *actor's* inferences as predictors and *actor's* relationship quality as an outcome. Actor inferences uniquely predicted actor relationship quality for the warmth/trustworthiness ($b = .16$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) and attractiveness/vitality dimensions ($b = .12$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) but not for the status/resources dimension ($b = .04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .15$). We also ran the models above, again controlling for the two sets of control variables. Actor's inferred discrepancies continued to predict relationship quality for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension (bs = .13 and .16, both ps $< .001$) and the attractiveness/vitality dimension (bs = .11 and .12, both ps $< .001$). To test for mediation for the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractiveness dimension, we computed asymmetric confidence intervals for the mediated effect following the procedures described by MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, and Lockwood (2007). Consistent with predictions and our conceptual model shown in Figure 1, inferences of a partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies, as well as vitality/attractiveness discrepancies, significantly mediated the *partner* effect on relationship satisfaction (95% CI of indirect effect [.021, .063] and [.020, .062] for the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractive-

[2] The patterns of results for the projection and accuracy paths are very similar when self-esteem is used in place of self perceptions in the two models including control variables.

Table 3
Ideal Discrepancies Predicting Actor Inferences of Partner's Discrepancies (Study 1)

Dimension	Original model	With actor control variables	With partner control variables
Warmth/trustworthiness			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.37***	.07	.38***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.25***	.17***	.23**
Ideal importance	—	.09	−.05
Partner perceptions	—	.20*	.06
Self perceptions	—	.65***	−.06
Attractiveness/vitality			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.31***	.15*	.29***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.33***	.22***	.16*
Ideal importance	—	.03	−.07
Partner perceptions	—	.04	.21*
Self perceptions	—	.54***	.06
Status/resources			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.24***	.16**	.24***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.33***	.20***	.11†
Ideal importance	—	−.01	−.01
Partner perceptions	—	−.09	.34***
Self perceptions	—	.63***	−.07

Note. Each model also controlled for participant sex. Actor and partner effects refer to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Actor ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions are added as control variables in column 2, and partner ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions are added as control variables in column 3. When a variable was not included in the model, dashes appear in the table in place of coefficients.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

ness dimensions, respectively). The 95% CI of indirect effects continued to not include zero when the control variables were entered into the models.

Discussion

The pattern of effects obtained from the models run in Study 1 supported our first set of hypotheses shown in Figure 1. A partner's ideal discrepancies on each dimension uniquely predicted actor's own relationship satisfaction ratings (i.e., there was evidence of a *partner* effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction; partner effect, Figure 1). Inferences of a partner's discrepancies were based on a blend of projection and accuracy across all ideal dimensions (projection and accuracy paths, Figure 1). Interestingly, there was a relatively larger contribution of accuracy versus projection for inferences of a partner's ideal discrepancies compared to previously examined constructs (e.g., communal responsiveness). Whereas previous work has found projection processes to dominate, accuracy and projection processes contributed equally to people's inferences of their partner's ideal discrepancies in Study 1. Furthermore, in line with our conceptual model (see Figure 1), these inferences mediated the *partner* effect of ideal discrepancies on the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractiveness dimensions and relationship quality. Importantly, this pattern of results was unaltered when statistically controlling for the components of discrepancies (i.e., ideal importance and partner perceptions), as well as self perceptions.

Although Study 1 provided evidence in support of our conceptual model, its design was unable to tap into potential mechanisms through which individuals generate accurate inferences regarding their partner's ideal discrepancies. In Study 2, we attempted to replicate support for our conceptual model shown in Figure 1 using a sample of married couples, but our primary goal was to test our hypothesis that patterns of interpersonal behavior convey the partner's ideal discrepancies and this evidence contributes to how people develop accurate inferences of their partner's ideal discrepancies.

Study 2

How is it that people are able to accurately track the degree to which they are meeting their partner's ideal standards? Previous research guided by the ISM has shown that when individuals feel their partner does not match their ideals, they attempt to motivate their partner to change in ways that would bring the partner more in line with their ideal standards (Overall et al., 2006; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). Moreover, receiving regulation attempts from the partner leads to more negative inferences regarding how the self matches the partner's ideal standards, especially if these regulation strategies are perceived to be more negative (Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006). Interpersonal behavior should therefore be an important means by which people infer how their partner perceives them, particularly within situations diagnostic of the partner's regard, such as when discussing relationship conflicts. To extend the results from Study 1 that found evidence that the inferences people make into their partner's discrepancies are predicted by both accuracy and projection processes, we designed Study 2 to examine how patterns of spontaneous interpersonal behaviors between partners during a conflict resolution discussion produce changes in inferences of a partner's discrepancies. This design also allowed for the secondary goal of replicating the results of Study 1 in a sample of married couples.

Our main purpose in Study 2 was to test whether individuals' inferences regarding the extent to which they match their partner's ideals correspond more closely with their partner's reported ideal discrepancies following a conflict resolution discussion with their partner, after controlling for prediscussion accuracy in inferences of partner's discrepancies. Conflict interactions are "diagnostic" situations (Kelley et al., 2003); that is, the partner's verbal and nonverbal behavior during conflict-related interactions should provide clear signals regarding the degree to which the partner evaluates the self. We expected, for example, that *partners* who held smaller ideal discrepancies would exhibit more positive behaviors toward *actors* (as coded by independent raters) during the conflict resolution discussion, whereas *partners* who possessed larger ideal discrepancies would display more negative behaviors. Furthermore, because we predicted that the spouse's patterns of positive and negative behavior during the discussion would communicate the *partner's* ideal discrepancies, we expected that changes in inferred ideal discrepancies should be linked to the types of behaviors enacted by the partner. In particular, intimates exposed to more negative and less positive behavior should make more negative inferences regarding their partner's discrepancies (controlling for prediscussion ratings). Thus, the *partner's* positive and negative behaviors should, at least partially, mediate pre- to post-discussion changes in how closely actor's inferred ideal discrepancies correspond to the partner's actual ideal discrepancies.

However, we expected this pattern of mediation to hold primarily for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, given the nature of the conflict resolution task. In addition to being more central to interactions within relationships compared to the other two dimensions (Fletcher et al., 1999), the traits associated with the warmth/trustworthiness dimension are more commensurate with patterns of behavior exhibited during a conflict resolution discussion. Accordingly, self-report research from a sample of individuals has shown that perceptions of the partner's negative conflict strategies are most strongly related to warmth/trustworthiness perceptions (Overall & Fletcher, 2010). Warmth/trustworthiness characteristics, such as trust, warmth, and sensitivity, are also key aspects of the most common conflicts that couples face, such as problems listening and communicating to each other, power struggles, physical and emotional intimacy, jealousy, and disputes over domestic responsibilities (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Accordingly, partner behaviors during the discussion seem more likely to provide accurate cues of a partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies than of discrepancies along the attractiveness/vitality and status/resources dimensions.

Method

Participants. A sample of 116 married couples was taken from a large community in southwestern Ontario, Canada, with advertisements in various local newspapers. The population of the community is approximately 350,000 people. Participants each received a $50 (Canadian) honorarium in exchange for taking part in this research. The average age of these individuals was 38.6 years for men (SD = 11.2 years) and 36.7 years for women (SD = 10.7 years). The average length of marriage was 10.1 years, with a range of 2 months to 53 years (SD = 10.6 years). The average number of children was 1.3 among the 70 couples who had children. This data set was used in Study 2 of Lackenbauer and Campbell (2012), but that research did not test the hypotheses that are addressed in the current research.

Materials.

Ideal discrepancies, ideal importance, partner, and self perceptions. The measures used in Study 1 for ideal discrepancies, inferences of partner's discrepancies, ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self ratings were again used for Study 2 (see Study 1's Materials section for details). Participants also answered the questionnaire assessing inferred ideal discrepancies following the conflict resolution discussion (described further below).

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed by the Satisfaction subscale of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Example items from this 10-item scale include "Do you regret that you ever got married?" and "How often do you discuss or have considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?" These items were answered on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (*all the time*) to 6 (*never*). Scores were aggregated across the 10 items, with higher scores representing more positive levels of marital satisfaction.

Coding of interpersonal behavior during conflict resolution. Five trained raters viewed each video-recorded discussion independently and rated the degree to which each partner engaged in eight interpersonal behaviors, four positive and four negative, using 7-point scales (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Interrater reliability was acceptable for each item for both husbands (mean α = .71, range = .61–.80) and wives (mean α = .72, range = .60–.81). The four items tapping positive behavior were To what degree did this person respond positively to his/her partner's initiations? To what degree did this person appear happy? To what degree did this person appear positive? To what degree did this person use humor to make his/her partner feel better? Scores on these items were averaged to calculate an index of positive behavior for both husbands and wives. The four items used to code negative behavior were How angry did this person appear to be with his/her partner? To what degree did this person respond negatively to his/her partner's comments? To what degree did this person blame his/her partner for the conflict? To what degree did this person appear irritated with his/her partner? These items were averaged to calculate an index of negative behavior for both husbands and wives.

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of all measures used in this study are presented in Table 4.

Procedure. Both members of each married couple were invited to attend a laboratory session in which they separately and privately completed a booklet of questionnaires that included measures of ideal discrepancies, inferred partner's discrepancies, and relationship satisfaction. After completing the questionnaires, couples made an appointment to return to the lab in 1–2 weeks to take part in a video-recorded discussion task. Eleven couples opted not to return for this follow-up session. Upon their return to the lab, participants were taken to a room containing a table and two chairs and outfitted with a video camera housed in a small, tinted dome mounted on the ceiling. A researcher provided each married couple with instructions on the discussion task. Couples were instructed to select a problem area that frequently caused friction in their relationship that they would attempt to resolve in the discussion. Participants were given 5 minutes to privately identify and agree upon a problem area in their relationship. The researcher

Table 4
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities of Study 2 Variables

Variable	*M* (*SD*)		Reliability	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Warmth/trustworthiness				
Ideal discrepancies	5.82 (0.93)	5.79 (1.03)	.89	.90
Inferred partner's discrepancies (pre)	5.28 (1.00)	5.67 (0.89)	.88	.88
Inferred partner's discrepancies (post)	5.33 (1.18)	5.53 (1.06)	.93	.92
Ideal importance	5.91 (0.85)	6.35 (0.78)	.89	.90
Partner perceptions	5.54 (0.77)	5.88 (0.73)	.86	.89
Self perceptions	5.89 (0.74)	5.86 (0.91)	.87	.90
Attractiveness/vitality				
Ideal discrepancy	5.55 (0.89)	5.62 (0.97)	.80	.79
Inferred partner's discrepancies (pre)	5.14 (0.92)	5.23 (0.93)	.79	.74
Inferred partner's discrepancies (post)	5.19 (0.93)	5.22 (0.95)	.83	.78
Ideal importance	4.85 (0.90)	4.47 (0.94)	.80	.77
Partner perceptions	5.07 (0.79)	4.95 (0.77)	.79	.69
Self perceptions	5.58 (0.76)	5.56 (0.89)	.76	.80
Status/resources				
Ideal discrepancy	5.31 (1.08)	5.29 (1.08)	.80	.82
Inferred partner's discrepancies (pre)	4.98 (1.00)	5.28 (0.96)	.75	.72
Inferred partner's discrepancies (post)	5.11 (1.03)	5.28 (0.93)	.82	.74
Ideal importance	3.93 (1.08)	4.70 (1.00)	.81	.81
Partner perceptions	5.19 (0.83)	5.26 (0.86)	.74	.72
Self perceptions	5.38 (0.98)	5.41 (0.96)	.80	.79
Marital satisfaction	3.63 (0.60)	3.68 (0.61)	.80	.90
Observed positive behavior	3.43 (0.91)	3.40 (0.95)	.88	.89
Observed negative behavior	2.57 (0.89)	2.72 (0.92)	.89	.91

then told couples that they might or might not be able to resolve the conflict, but to try their best to achieve this goal. Couples were given 12 minutes for their discussion. Following the discussion, spouses were asked to sign a video release form allowing the video-recorded discussion to be used for research purposes. One couple did not sign the release form, leaving the behaviors of 104 couples available for analysis. Finally, after the conflict resolution discussion, husbands and wives were taken to separate rooms where they completed an additional questionnaire package that included the same inferred partner's discrepancies they completed during their first visit to the laboratory.

Results

We first present the results from the same set of models used in Study 1 to test the conceptual model in Figure 1. We then present analyses testing the second set of hypotheses regarding interpersonal behavior and changes in inferences of partner's discrepancies. As for Study 1, we also report the results of models that control for (a) actor and (b) partner ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions.

Relationship satisfaction and partner's ideal discrepancies. Three models were estimated (one for each of the ISM's ideal dimensions) with *actor's* marital satisfaction as the outcome variable, and *actor's* and *partner's* ideal discrepancies as predictors. Results from these analyses are displayed in Table 5. As in Study 1, ideal discrepancies were independently linked to both *actor's* and *partner's* relationship satisfaction. Individuals reported lower relationship satisfaction when they had larger ideal discrepancies (the *actor* effect path in Figure 1), and individuals with a partner who reported larger warmth/trustworthiness ideal discrepancies had lower levels of marital satisfaction (the *partner* effect path in Figure 1). Although the pattern of partner effects in this sample is

Table 5
Ideal Discrepancies Predicting Actor Relationship Satisfaction (Study 2)

Dimension	Original model	With actor control variables	With partner control variables
Warmth/trustworthiness			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.26***	.24***	.27***
Partner ideal discrepancies	.17***	.13**	.20***
Ideal importance	—	−.05	−.09*
Partner perceptions	—	.11*	−.07
Attractiveness/vitality			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.21***	.22***	.23***
Partner ideal discrepancies	.06	.01	.04
Ideal importance	—	−.10*	.03
Partner perceptions	—	.14*	−.07
Status/resources			
Actor ideal discrepancies	.18***	.17***	.18***
Partner ideal discrepancies	.05	.02	.06
Ideal importance	—	−.09*	−.01
Partner perceptions	—	.09	−.06

Note. Each model also controlled for participant sex. Actor and partner effects refer to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Actor ideal importance and partner perceptions are added as control variables in column 2, and partner ideal importance and partner perceptions are added as control variables in column 3. When a variable was not included in the model, dashes appear in the table in place of coefficients.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

similar to that found in Study 1, the only significant partner effect was found for the warmth/trustworthiness ideal dimension (the other two partner effects were trends). The overall pattern of effects was unaltered in the models including actor and partner control variables.

Accuracy and projection of inferences of partner discrepancies. To assess the independent effects of accuracy and projection processes on inferences of a *partner's* discrepancies, we estimated three models (one for each ideal dimension) with *actor's* ideal discrepancies (projection path), *partner's* ideal discrepancies (accuracy path), and sex as predictor variables and *actor's* inferred discrepancies as the outcome. There were significant sex differences found for the warmth/trustworthiness ($b = -.19$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) and status/resource dimensions ($b = -.15$, $SE = .06$, $p < .05$). As in Study 1, men were more likely to infer that they were not meeting their wife's ideals on warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources. We conducted follow up analyses by using sex as a moderator variable. The projection and accuracy paths did not significantly differ across men and women.

Results supported our prediction that inferences of a *partner's* discrepancies would be a blend of projection and accuracy processes. Table 6 displays the results for the three models used to test this hypothesis. Across all three ideal dimensions, *actor's* inferences were uniquely predicted by both *actor's* discrepancies (projection component) and *partner's* discrepancies (accuracy component). Consistent with the effect of the partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies on relationship quality, the accuracy path remained strong when accounting for the components of ideal discrepancies as well as self perceptions. However, the accuracy path was reduced to nonsignificance for the attractiveness/vitality and status/resources dimensions when controlling for the partner control variables. We explore reasons for these differences below.

Do inferences of partner's discrepancies account for the partner effect of ideal discrepancies on relationship satisfaction? As for Study 1, to test whether *actor's* inferences into a *partner's* discrepancies mediated the link between *partner's* discrepancies and an *actor's* relationship satisfaction, we estimated three additional models, one for each dimension, with *actor's* and *partner's* discrepancies, sex, and *actor's* inferences as predictors and *actor's* relationship satisfaction as an outcome. Actor inferences uniquely predicted actor relationship satisfaction for the warmth/trustworthiness ($b = .12$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) and attractiveness/vitality dimensions ($b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $p < .05$) but not for the status/resources dimension ($b = .06$, $SE = .04$, $p = .11$). Although the inclusion of the partner set of control variables reduced the accuracy path to nonsignificance for the attractiveness/vitality dimension (see Table 6), actor inferences continued to predict actor relationship satisfaction when actor ($b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$) and partner ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$) control variables were entered into the model. To test for mediation for the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractiveness dimension, we computed asymmetric confidence intervals for the mediated effect following the procedures described by MacKinnon et al. (2007). Consistent with predictions and our conceptual model in Figure 1, inferences of a partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies, as well as vitality/attractiveness discrepancies, significantly mediated the *partner* effect on relationship satisfaction (95% CI of indirect effect [.012, .085] and [.007, .067] for the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractiveness dimensions, respectively). Furthermore, when we reran analyses controlling for actor and partner control variables, actor inferred discrepancies continued to predict rela-

Table 6
Ideal Discrepancies Predicting Actor Inferences of Partner's Discrepancies (Study 2)

Dimension	Original model	With actor control variables	With partner control variables
Warmth/trustworthiness			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.41***	.28***	.45***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.33***	.19***	.25**
Ideal importance	—	.01	−.03
Partner perceptions	—	−.07	.33***
Self perceptions	—	.66***	−.35***
Attractiveness/vitality			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.28***	.37***	.29***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.35***	.17***	.06
Ideal importance	—	−.03	−.02
Partner perceptions	—	−.35***	.47***
Self perceptions	—	.73***	−.13
Status/resources			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.21**	.25***	.22***
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.36***	.20***	.05
Ideal importance	—	.11*	.09
Partner perceptions	—	−.28**	.44***
Self perceptions	—	.68***	.01

Note. Each model also controlled for participant sex. Actor and partner effects refer to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Actor ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions were added as control variables in column 2, and partner ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions were added as control variables in column 3. When a variable was not included in the model, dashes appear in the table in place of coefficients.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

tionship quality for the warmth/trustworthiness (both *b*s = .12, both *p*s < .05) and the attractiveness/vitality (see above) dimensions and to mediate the effects of the partner's ideal discrepancies (95% CI of indirect effects continued to not include zero).

In sum, using a sample of married couples from another country, Study 2 largely replicated the results found in Study 1 and supported our conceptual model. We next turned our attention to answering what information individuals use to generate accurate inferences of their partner's ideal discrepancies by testing how dyads' interactions shape individuals' inferences of their partner's discrepancies.

Do inferences of a partner's ideal discrepancies change after trying to resolve a relationship conflict? To assess if individuals' inferences regarding how closely they are meeting their partner's ideals following a conflict resolution discussion change in a manner consistent with their partner's discrepancies, we estimated models with *actor's* postdiscussion inferences of a *partner's* discrepancies as the outcome variable and *actor's* prediscussion inferences of the corresponding discrepancies as a predictor. By partialing the effect of prediscussion inferences, this analysis tested whether any changes in people's inferences regarding how they match their spouse's ideals from pre- to postdiscussion were significantly predicted by the other prediscussion independent variables in the model (in this case, by *actor* and *partner* ideal discrepancies scores; see Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Next, *actor's* and *partner's* prediscussion discrepancies were entered as predictor variables. The results from these models are presented in Table 7. After controlling for prediscussion (i.e., chronic) levels of *actor's* inferences of a partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies, *partner's* perceived discrepancies measured prior to the discussion uniquely and positively predicted changes in *actor's* postdiscussion inferences. Inclusion of the control variables as predictors did not remove the accuracy path for this dimension. A similar pattern of effects emerged for the vitality/attractiveness and status/resources dimensions, but the accuracy paths for these dimensions reduced to nonsignificance when each set of control variables was entered as predictors.

Do people's discrepancies predict their patterns of positive and negative behavior toward their partner during conflict resolution discussions? To answer this question, we ran models predicting observer rated positive and negative interpersonal behavior derived from the video-recordings separately by *actor's* and *partner's* discrepancies on each of three dimension. No actor or partner effects emerged for the vitality/attractiveness or status/resources dimension in the prediction of either positive or negative interpersonal behavior. As expected, however, people who perceived their partner as more closely matching their warmth/trustworthiness ideal standards (i.e., smaller ideal discrepancies) behaved more positively ($b = .24$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) and less negatively toward their spouse ($b = -.25$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) during the discussion. In addition, a significant *partner* effect of warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies revealed that individuals who more closely matched their *partner's* ideals were observed to interact more positively ($b = .23$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), but *partner's* ideal discrepancies were not associated with *actor's* negative behaviors ($b = -.06$, $SE = .06$, $p = .29$). When these

Table 7
Prediscussion Ideal Discrepancies and Inferences Predicting Actor's Postdiscussion Inferences of Partner's Discrepancies (Study 2)

Dimension	Original model	With actor control variables	With partner control variables
Warmth/trustworthiness			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.15*	.07	.12
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.24***	.21**	.21*
Actor's inferences of partner's discrepancies	.54***	.35***	.56***
Ideal importance	—	−.02	−.07
Partner perceptions	—	.15	.04
Self perceptions	—	.32**	.10
Attractiveness/vitality			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.13**	.04	.11*
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.11*	.06	.01
Actor's inferences of partner's discrepancies	.61**	.48***	.59***
Ideal importance	—	−.01	.04
Partner perceptions	—	.16*	.13
Self perceptions	—	.31***	.11
Status/resources			
Actor ideal discrepancies (projection path)	.05	.01	.02
Partner ideal discrepancies (accuracy path)	.16**	.12**	.10†
Actor's inferences of partner's discrepancies	.56**	.30***	.54***
Ideal importance	—	−.02	−.09
Partner perceptions	—	.01	.11
Self perceptions	—	.60***	.09

Note. Each model also controlled for participant sex. Actor and partner effects refer to the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Actor ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions were added as control variables in column 2, and partner ideal importance, partner perceptions, and self perceptions were added as control variables in column 3. When a variable was not included in the model, dashes appear in the table in place of coefficients.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

models were rerun with the actor and partner control variables included, no significant actor or partner effects of ideal importance or partner perceptions emerged, and the effects reported above remained virtually unchanged. Thus, it is specifically the degree to which the partner is discrepant from ideals, not just positive or negative perceptions, that is related to people's behavior. Accordingly, partner behavior should accurately convey those discrepancies, which we test next.

Does a partner's interpersonal behavior during conflict resolution account for changes in inferred ideal discrepancies? The evidence presented above indicates that (a) actor's inferred ideal discrepancies change following a conflict-resolution discussion and these changes are positively predicted by the partner's ideal discrepancies and (b) that the partner behave more positively and less negatively when the actor more closely match warmth/trustworthiness ideal standards. To test whether actor's pre- to postdiscussion changes in inferred ideal discrepancies occur because the partner's observed behavior provides critical information about the partner's evaluations of the self (i.e., are mediated by the partner's behavior), we ran models predicting postdiscussion inferences by the actor's inferences prediscussion (to assess residual change in inferred discrepancies), the actor's (projection) and partner's (accuracy) ideal discrepancies prediscussion, and the partner's positive behavior. Partner's positive behavior was significantly associated with smaller postdiscussion inferences of a partner's discrepancies ($b = .16$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$), meaning that actors reported more closely matching their partner's ideals when their partners were observed to behave in a more positive manner toward them during the conflict discussion task. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero [.006, .091], suggesting that partner's positive behavior significantly mediated the link between partner's perceived discrepancies and actor's postdiscussion inferences (controlling for actor's prediscussion inferences). When the control variables were entered as predictors, partner's positive behavior continued to predict changes in actor's inferences (bs = .20 and .17, ps $< .05$), and the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect continued to not include zero.

Adding partner's negative behaviors to the model also resulted in a pattern of mediation. Partner's negative behaviors during the discussion significantly predicted actor's postdiscussion inferences of partner's warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies ($b = -.14$, $SE = .07$, $p < .05$), meaning that actors reported less closely matching their partner's ideals when their partners were observed to behave in a more negative manner toward them during the conflict discussion task. In addition, the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero [.002, .081], suggesting that partner's negative behavior significantly mediated the link between partner's perceived discrepancies and actor's postdiscussion inferences (controlling for actor's prediscussion inferences). When the control variables were entered as predictors, partner's negative behavior continued to predict changes in actor's inferences (bs = $-.24$ and $-.14$, $p < .05$ and $p = .058$), and the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect continued to not include zero.

The pattern of mediation found in these two models provides evidence to support our hypothesis that interpersonal behaviors can serve as one channel through which spouses gather information related to how closely they are meeting their partner's ideal standards.

Discussion

Analyses conducted on the married couples sample in Study 2 yielded results that replicated and extended Study 1. Consistent with our model in Figure 1, individuals' inferences regarding how much they match their partner's ideals were based on projection and accuracy, and individuals' accurate inferences regarding how closely they matched their partner's ideal standards, in turn predicted levels of relationship satisfaction. The results were strongest for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, consistent with prior ISM research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001; Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006) and the critical nature of these attributes for relationship functioning. The primary goal in Study 2, however, was to test whether interpersonal behaviors serve a communicative role in how individuals come to accurately assess how closely they are meeting their partner's ideal standards. Consistent with prior research examining self-reported regulation behaviors and ideal standards (Overall et al., 2006), Study 2 found a link between having larger warmth/trustworthiness ideal discrepancies and committing more negative and less positive behavior toward one's partner while discussing an important conflict in the marriage. Importantly, exposure to the partner's behaviors in this diagnostic situation appears to be one mechanism through which individuals are able to determine how closely they are meeting their partner's ideals. The discussion predicted residual changes (pre- to postdiscussion) in the individuals' inferences of the partner's ideal discrepancies. Moreover, the changes in these inferences were consistent with the meaning of the partner's behavior. Partners who held greater discrepancies behaved more negatively and less positively, and individuals in turn generated more negative inferences of their partner's ideal discrepancies. As we expected, however, the partners' behaviors were associated only with increases or decreases in inferred ideal discrepancies on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, consistent with the central and interpersonal nature of these traits and the pivotal role they should play in conflict-related interactions.

General Discussion

The current studies add to our understanding of the ISM by identifying and explaining how ideal discrepancies held by one partner affect the perceptions and relationship satisfaction of the other partner. Partner effects are a defining characteristic of close relationships (Kelley et al., 1983), yet only about 25% of samples used to research romantic relationship processes contain data from both partners (Kashy, Campbell, & Harris, 2006). In the current research, analyses of two large dyadic samples, obtained in two countries from independent research labs, demonstrated that having a partner who perceives the self to less closely match his or her ideal standards (ideal discrepancies) is associated with lower relationship satisfaction independent of one's own ideal discrepancies. As predicted, both studies also provided evidence that this partner effect occurs because individuals are able to accurately assess the degree to which they match their partner's ideal standards. In particular, inferences regarding the degree to which the self matched the partner's ideals were associated with the partner's

actual ideal discrepancies (accuracy) in addition to individuals' own partner and self evaluations (or projection processes, the focus of prior research). Moreover, the results from Study 2 revealed that the partner's behavior plays a key role in how people make accurate inferences of their partner's evaluation of the self. The less individuals matched their partner's ideal, the more their partner behaved negatively during discussions of unresolved relationship problems. The partner's behavior, in turn, led to corresponding changes in the individuals' inferences of the partner's regard. We discuss the importance of these findings below.

Inferring a Partner's Discrepancies: Accuracy and Projection Processes

Drawing together multiple perspectives, constructs, and measurements, the perceived partner responsiveness model (Reis, 2007; Reis et al., 2004) highlights that key relationship outcomes are strongly influenced by individuals' inferences regarding how they are valued and regarded by their partner. Given the importance of such judgments, a primary goal in this research was to examine the relative veracity of inferences into the partner's evaluations. There exists ample evidence showing that how we perceive others evaluate us is influenced by factors beyond how we are actually viewed by others. These factors include individual differences in self-esteem (Murray et al., 2000), interpersonal goals (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b), and heuristics like assumed similarity (Lemay et al., 2007; Marks & Miller, 1987; Schul & Vinokur, 2000). Indeed, there is good reason to expect that one's own views of the self, partner, and relationship can trammel one's ability to accurately perceive how the partner views the self. However, the crucial outcomes associated with partner's evaluations of the self—including partner's satisfaction and continued investment versus dissatisfaction and potential rejection—should also motivate accurate assessments of partner's evaluations (see also Vorauer & Ross, 1996). Consistent with the ISM, which posits that ideal standards guide relationship evaluations, behavior, and decisions, greater partner ideal discrepancies are associated with greater dissatisfaction, more negative interpersonal behaviors, and greater risk of relationship dissolution (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000a; Overall et al., 2006). Accordingly, individuals should be particularly attuned to how their partner assesses the self in relation to the partner's ideals to avoid rejection and take remedial action when failing to meet the partner's standards (Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2012).

Our results provide good evidence that inferences regarding how the self corresponds to the partner's ideal standards are a blend of both projection and accuracy processes. First, as expected and across studies, one partner's ideal discrepancies were associated with the other partner's relationship satisfaction. This partner effect implies that people are able to ascertain the degree to which they are meeting their partner's ideals. Indeed, despite inferred ideal discrepancies being influenced by an individual's own evaluation of his or her partner (projection), there was relatively strong correspondence between the partner's ideal discrepancies and the individual's inferences of those discrepancies (accuracy) across all three dimensions. Second, across both studies, inferences about the partner's discrepancies partially mediated the partner effect for the warmth/trustworthiness and vitality/attractiveness dimensions. That is, when individuals were more discrepant from their partner's ideal on these dimensions, they experienced lower relationship satisfaction partially because they accurately inferred that they were more discrepant from their partner's ideal. These effects also occurred over and above other projection processes shown by prior research, including individuals' own ideal discrepancies and self evaluations.

The ISM holds that one of the main functions of ideal standards is to help individuals evaluate the health of a romantic relationship by identifying areas of strength and weakness in both a romantic partner and the self (Simpson et al., 2001). The current results provide evidence for this diagnostic function of ideal standards by showing that individuals are accurately picking up on how they are being assessed compared to their partner's ideals. Moreover, the relative influence of accuracy compared to projection in the current research was substantially larger than previous cross-sectional research interested in similar processes using different constructs (e.g., perceived regard, communal responsiveness). This could stem from individuals feeling more motivated to make accurate assessments when asked to infer their partner's discrepancies.

Judgments are guided by both accuracy goals involving the desire to make a correct conclusion and directional goals involving the desire to reach a particular conclusion (Kunda, 1990). This distinction relates to the differences between epistemic and esteem needs within close relationships (Gagné & Lydon, 2004). Whereas individuals are often motivated to view their relationship in a positive manner (Murray, 1999) and to avoid threatening thoughts and feelings (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995), there are also instances where individuals are motivated to gather information in an attempt to better understand their relationship (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). These processes can operate simultaneously (Lackenbauer, Campbell, Rubin, Fletcher, & Troister, 2010), as supported by the blend of projection and accuracy found in the current research. However, the nature of the content and function of ideal standards may be particularly well suited for gathering information to meet epistemic relationship needs relative to more globally measured constructs.

Another factor that could be driving the relatively higher levels of accuracy found in the current research is the fact that the measure used to assess ideal discrepancies and inferences of a partner's discrepancies requires subjects to use ideals as a point of comparison. Partner, self, and relationship appraisals are almost exclusively measured on Likert-type absolute scales (e.g., "My partner is kind"; anchored from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*). Responses to explicit attitude measures have been proposed to require automatic activation, deliberation, and response phases (Krosnick, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2005). Inferences of a partner's discrepancies were measured on a standard Likert-type scale, but participants were instructed to make these appraisals relative to their partner's ideal standards. This process of comparison may have led to more in-depth processing during the deliberative phase of responding. There is also evidence that using relative rather than absolute attitude measures is linked to more accurate prediction of criteria, such as self-reported behavior (Olson, Goffin, & Haynes, 2007). Importantly, as predicted by the ISM, it is the specific comparisons between perceptions and ideals standards, not simply positive versus negative perceptions or high or low ideal importance, that drive relationship evaluation and regulation processes. Accordingly, the effects found in the current

research typically occurred above and beyond ideal importance and partner perceptions, illustrating the importance of people's evaluations of the correspondence between perceptions and standards.

The Calibration of Inferred Ideal Discrepancies

Another important and novel contribution provided by the current research involves how people generate accurate inferences of their partner's ideal standards. In Study 2, the partner's warmth/trustworthiness ideal discrepancies predicted the way that partner behaved during observed conflict discussions. Furthermore, after encountering this diagnostic information, individuals' inferences regarding their partner's discrepancies changed in ways that corresponded to the partner's behavior. Although prior self-report research has shown that receiving regulation attempts, particularly negative regulation attempt strategies, from the partner leads to more negative inferences regarding how the self matches the partner's ideal standards (Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006), this is the first study to demonstrate that individuals are picking up and using information communicated to them by their partner's behavior during important relationship interactions to generate accurate inferences regarding how closely they match their partner's ideal, at least on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension.

This calibration of inferred ideal discrepancies from a partner's behavior is consistent with our discussion of accuracy motives in relationships in the prior section. That is, situations that are diagnostic for the relationship should activate accuracy motives, and as relationships develop and partners interact across more domains, they are also likely to navigate many relationship-diagnostic situations (e.g., Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Over time, therefore, there are many opportunities in relationships to be exposed to information conveying the presence and magnitude of a partner's discrepancies that should result in a greater correspondence between inferred and actual ideal discrepancies between partners. Accordingly, individuals displayed context-relevant changes in inferred ideal discrepancies following a marital conflict interaction. A similar process should occur across multiple relationship situations. Future research repeatedly measuring couples over time, and across different diagnostic situations, could provide further evidence of how individuals develop more accurate inferences of their partner's regard as couples enter and exit diagnostic situations.

Different relationship diagnostic contexts may also be more directly relevant to some dimensions than others. In the current research, as predicted, the partner's behavior during a conflict discussion was associated with changes in inferred partner's discrepancies on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. As outlined above, warmth/trustworthiness characteristics are more central to a variety of common conflicts experienced within relationships and may speak most strongly to how partners view the self as a warm and trustworthy partner. Consistent with prior research (Overall et al., 2009; Whisman et al., 1997), the focus of the conflict discussions observed in the current research was largely on interpersonal issues, such as lack of emotional support or not thinking of a partner's needs, closely aligned with the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. Conflict stemming from financial stressors, such as job loss, home foreclosure, and bankruptcy (e.g., Conger, Ge, Elder, & Lorenz, 1994; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999), is likely to provide more diagnostic information regarding status/resources attributes. Similarly, at times when one or both partners have concerns over their own or their partner's physical appearance or vitality, inferred discrepancies on this dimension may change to more accurately track the partner's ideal discrepancies. Future research should focus on contexts more likely to involve discrepancies on the status/resources and vitality/attractiveness dimensions to replicate the pattern of effects we reported.

Strengths, Caveats, and Future Directions

The current research employed two separate dyadic samples, collected in different countries and by different research labs, and objectively assessed conflict behavior during couples' observed discussions. The main results replicated across both studies and were relatively robust, emerging controlling for projection processes as well as the separate components of ideal discrepancies (ideal importance and partner perceptions). However, the results were much stronger for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, and our model in Figure 1 was not evident when we assessed the status/resources dimension. This is consistent with prior ISM research, which has shown warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies to have stronger associations and status/resources discrepancies to have weaker associations with relationship outcomes and behavior (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001; Overall & Fletcher, 2010; Overall et al., 2006). We have already discussed why warmth/trustworthiness discrepancies are so pivotal and should be so across all relationship types and contexts. The relative impact of status/resources (and attractiveness/vitality) discrepancies, in contrast, may vary more according to the context, such as when there are pressing financial problems facing partners. Future investigations could target specific contexts in which judgments along dimensions other than warmth/trustworthiness should strongly influence partner and relationship evaluations.

The current studies also illustrated that individuals generate relatively accurate inferences of their partner's evaluations along key mate evaluation dimensions and that accurate inferences are generated via the partner's behavior exhibited within diagnostic contexts—contexts that should increase the importance that individuals are accurate in their assessment of their partner's evaluation. However, there are likely other contexts in which the motive for accuracy is trumped by the motive to maintain felt esteem, such as in the early stages of relationships or during more routine interactions. Other factors outside the individual are also likely to enhance or impede accuracy, such as the partner's engaging more direct communication versus concealing his or her negative evaluations (Overall et al., 2009). The importance of accurately assessing the partner's evaluations and the contribution these inferences have to relationship satisfaction suggests that isolating the contextual factors that shape these processes is a good direction for future research.

Conclusion

Prior research and theory highlight that perceiving the partner understands, values, and supports the self is a pivotal determinant of relationship functioning (see Reis, 2007). The current research illustrates that these perceptions are not just assumed based on

individuals' own evaluations and desires but are shaped by relationship realities, including the partner's behavior toward the self. First, we found that individuals are relatively accurate at inferring how their partner judges them along important ideal dimensions, and these inferences account (in part) for how the partner's evaluation of the self influence relationship satisfaction. Second, the results also illustrate that accurate inferences regarding the partner's evaluations of the self are (at least in part) generated by the partner's positive and negative behaviors during diagnostic relationship interactions. Together, these findings highlight that people use behavioral information to generate relatively accurate inferences regarding the partner's regard and valuing of the self, despite prior work focusing on how such inferences are biased by people's own self and partner evaluations.

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