



Dual Pathways Linking Self-esteem to Relationship Satisfaction: Perceived Regard and Relationship Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that perceived regard from romantic partners mediates the relationship between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. The current research tests the additional mediating role of *relationship self-efficacy*, the confidence one feels in their ability to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Study 1 was cross-sectional ($n = 221$), with participants reporting on their close friend or romantic partner. Study 2 was longitudinal and used romantic dyads ($n = 233$). Both studies suggested that perceived regard and relationship efficacy were parallel mediators in the effect of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses showed that perceived regard and relationship-efficacy prospectively predicted relationship satisfaction. These results extended prior research by suggesting that relationship-efficacy is a second pathway in the link between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. Practical and theoretical implications will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

- The *Risk Regulation Model* proposes that *perceived regard* (the extent to which people believe that their romantic partner values them) mediates the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 2000; 2006).
- In the current research, we test an expanded model that includes a second mediator that may explain the effects of self-esteem on relationship quality: relationship efficacy.
- Relationship efficacy* refers to the degree to which people feel that they can confidently resolve interpersonal conflicts with their partner (Cui et al., 2008; Doherty, 1981).
 - Prior research has found that self-esteem and general self-efficacy were related in both organizational and academic settings (Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Lane, et al., 2004); and that there is an association between self-esteem and relationship efficacy (Cabeldue & Boswell, 2012).
 - Furthermore, general self-efficacy predicts satisfaction within multiple contexts such as the workplace (Erdwins et al., 2001), academic settings (O’Sullivan, 2011), and familial relationships (Cui et al., 2008).
 - Given these associations between self-esteem and self-efficacy; and efficacy beliefs and satisfaction in multiple domains, we will examine the potential mediating role of relationship efficacy in the effect of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction.
- Hypothesis:** Relationship efficacy and perceived regard will independently mediate the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction: greater self-esteem will be linked to greater perceived regard and higher relationship efficacy, and both will predict higher relationship satisfaction.
- Rationale:** High self-esteem is associated with positive self-perceptions of ability across most domains. Thus, high self-esteem may predict greater relationship efficacy (Cabeldue & Boswell, 2012). In turn, relationship efficacy should promote more constructive problem-solving and optimism about the future of the relationship.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

- Undergraduate participants ($N = 212$; 57 men, 154 women, 1 non-binary, *Mean* age = 19.89 years; *SD* = 1.53), who were in a romantic relationship or had a close friend to report on, completed this study.
 - 49.1% White, 22% Asian/Asian American, 14.6% Black/African American, 5.2% Hispanic/Latino American, and 7.1% mixed or other

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Method (Study 1 Continued)

Measures

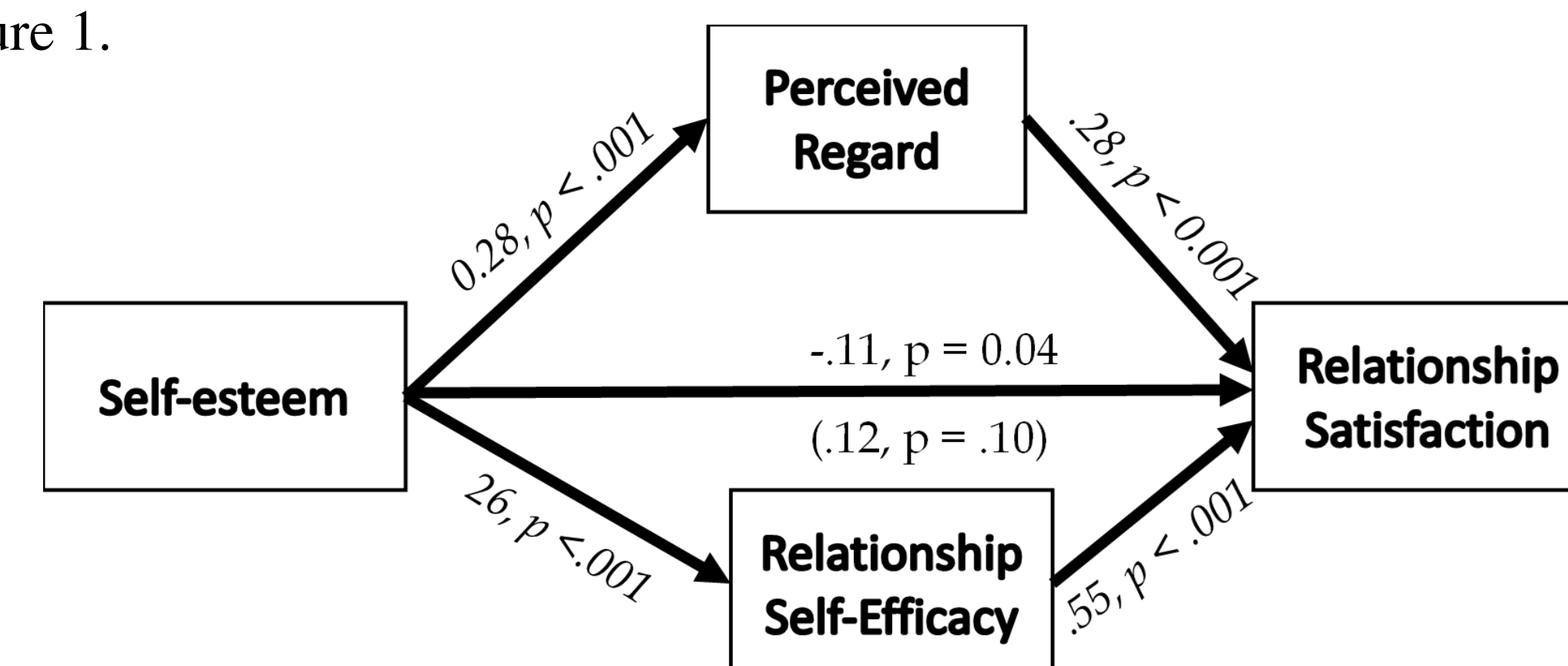
- Self-esteem*: Participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) using 7-point response scales (1: *strongly disagree*; 7: *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .90$; (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”).
- Relationship-efficacy*: Participants completed the Fincham Relationship-Efficacy Scale (Fincham et al., 2000) using the same 7-point response scales ($\alpha = .89$ “I am able to do the things needed to settle our conflicts”).
- Perceived Regard*: Participants completed an adapted version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure perceived regard. Items were completed using the same 7-point response scales ($\alpha = .75$; “He/she feels that I have a number of good qualities”).
- Relationship satisfaction*. Participants completed the 5-item satisfaction subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) using the same 7-point response scales ($\alpha = .90$; “Our relationship makes me very happy”).

Procedures

- Participants completed a battery of questionnaires on Qualtrics

Results

- Regression analysis was used to test the double mediation model. Results are presented in Figure 1.



Note. Coefficients are standardized.

Figure 1: Mediation model for relationship between relationship satisfaction and self-esteem

Discussion

- This mediation analysis supported the dual mediation model.
- However, participants were undergraduate students, we did not account for the romantic partner’s actual regard, and we did not examine change over time.

STUDY 2

Participants

- Both members of the romantic dyad were recruited for this study through Prolific.
- Participants received cash rewards for completing the survey.
 - 233 dyads ($N = 466$; 218 males, 240 females, 5 non-binary/other, Mean age = 30.33, $SD = 9.64$)
 - 62.8% Caucasian/White, 18% Asian, 8.4% Black/African American, 7% Mixed Race, 3.4% Other, .2% Native American/Alaskan Native, .2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Measures

- The same measurements in study 1 for self-esteem, perceived regard, relationship efficacy, and relationship satisfaction.
- Partner’s Actual Regard: Participants competed a scale modified from the perceived regard scale in Study 1 to assess regard for their partner using the same 7-point response scales (e.g., “I feel that [my partner] have a number of good qualities”).

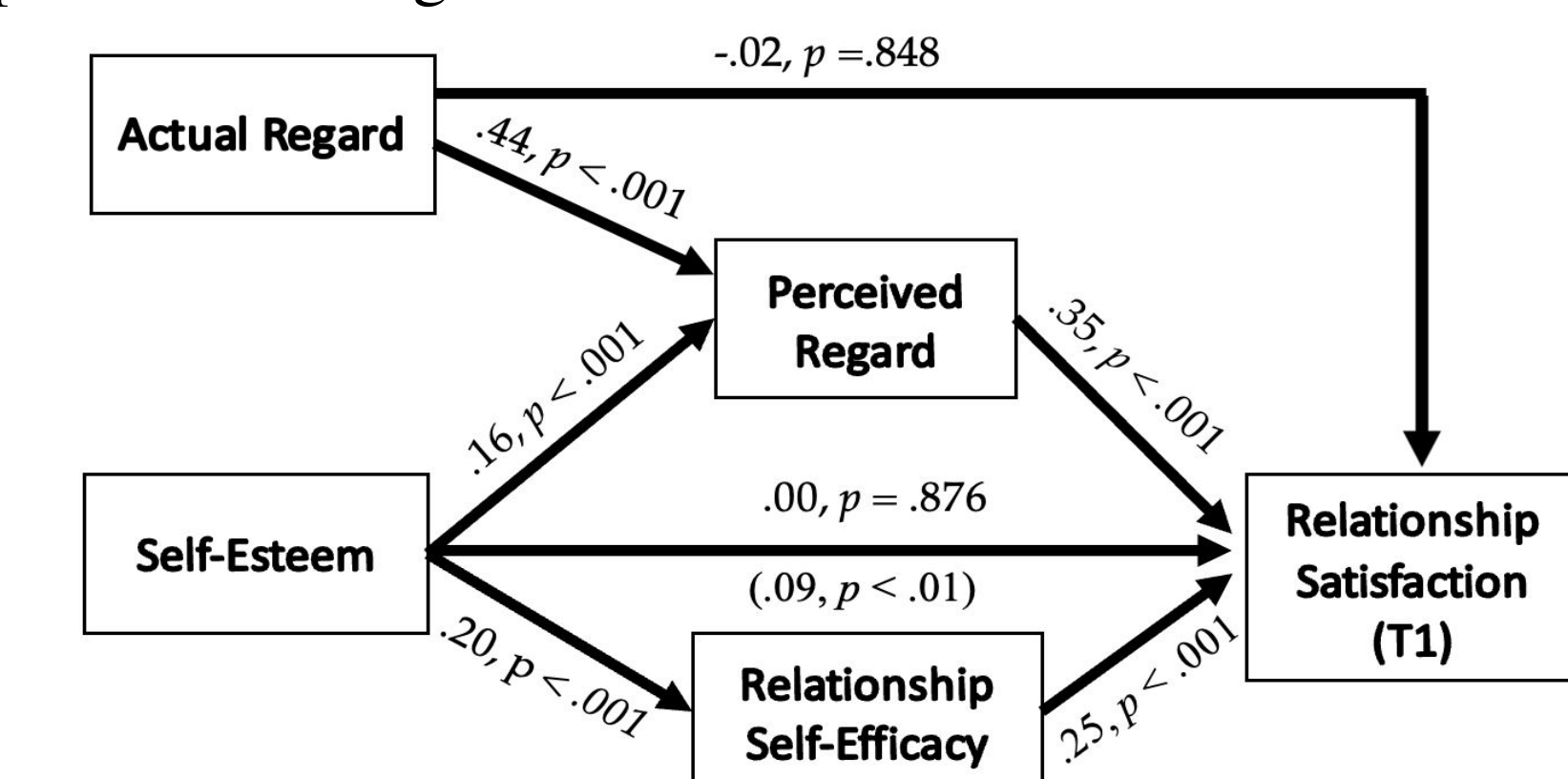
Method (Study 2 Continued)

Procedures

- The dyads completed an online questionnaire in Qualtrics
- The dyads were asked to re-do the questionnaire again after 6 months

Results

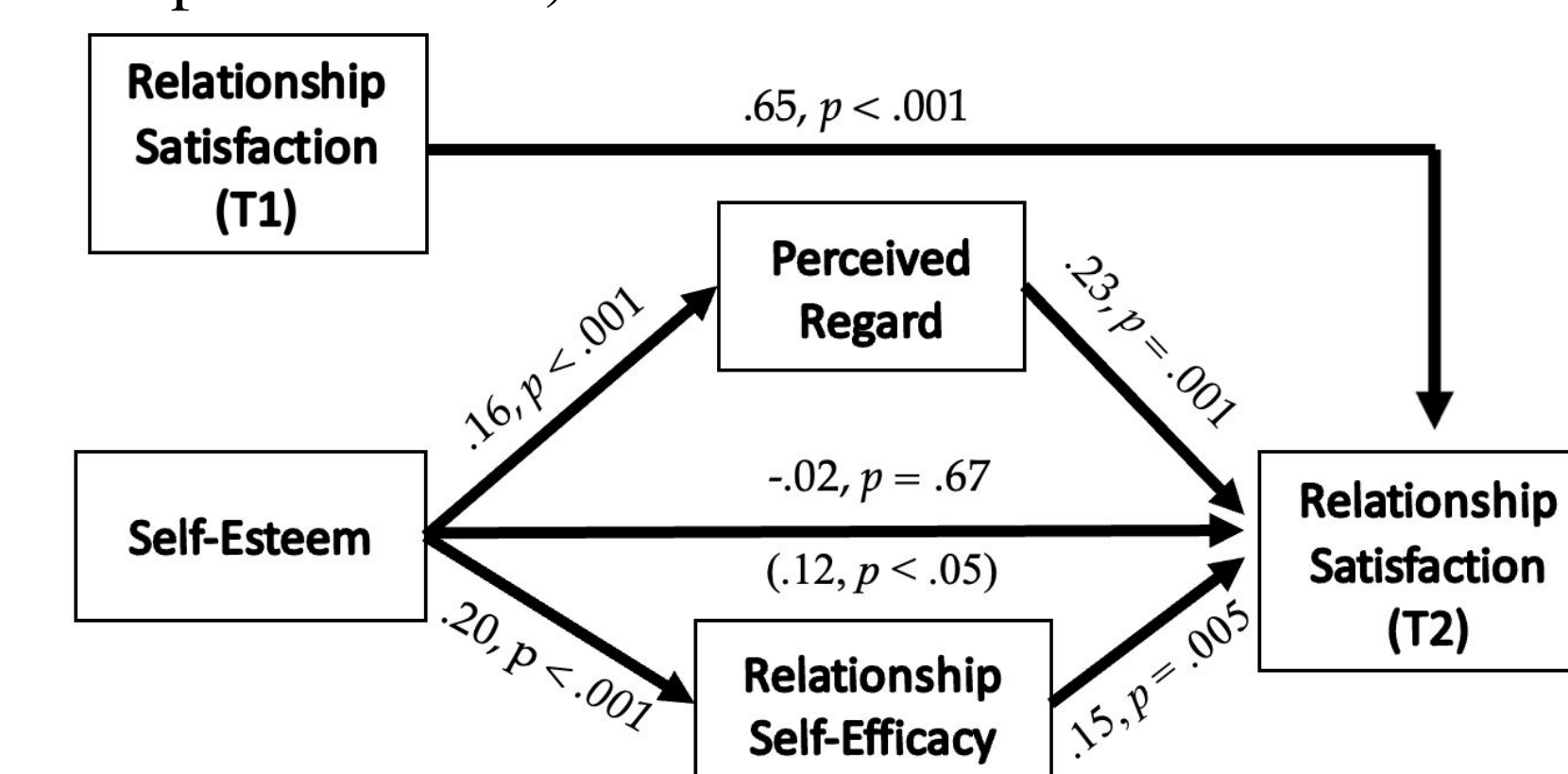
- Hypotheses were tested using multilevel regression models treating the partners as nested within dyad. Results are presented in Figure 2.



Note. Coefficients are standardized.

Figure 2: Mediation model for relationship between relationship satisfaction and self-esteem while controlling for partner’s actual regard.

- Couple’s relationship satisfaction was measured again 6 months later (relationship satisfaction at time 2). Relationship satisfaction at time 2 was regressed on perceived regard and relationship efficacy at time 1, while controlling for self-esteem and relationship satisfaction at time 1 (the initial measure of relationship satisfaction).



Note. Coefficients are standardized.

Figure 3: Mediation model for relationship between relationship satisfaction and self-esteem while controlling for self-esteem at time 1.

Discussion

- Results supported the dual mediation model while controlling for the partner’s actual regard. This sample was also more diverse in terms of age and college enrollment. The longitudinal design permitted examination of change over time in satisfaction.

Conclusion

- Results from both studies supported our hypothesis that perceived regard and relationship efficacy independently mediated the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction.
- Theoretically, this research identifies an additional mediator, relationship efficacy, to the original risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2000; 2006), highlighting the fact that self-esteem may impact relationship quality through multiple pathways. Self-esteem may impact relationship satisfaction because it shapes how people think they are viewed and their confidence in solving relationship problems.
- Practically, the study has identified multiple variables that could be targeted by interventions to improve relationship well-being for those with low self-esteem.