

# The Link Between Perceptual Congruence and Couple Relationship Satisfaction in Dyadic Coping

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**Abstract.** The current study extends prior research on perceptual congruence within couples by examining some variables of perceptual congruence in the context of dyadic coping. We examined each partner's perceived similarity in dyadic coping, actual similarity in providing and receiving support in times of stress, and what we call the couple bond, that is, the recognition of each partner's coping efforts as measured at a couple level. In a sample of 281 married and unmarried couples, we tested the predictive power of perceptual congruence variables on relationship satisfaction. Congruence variables were computed through an idiographic or dyad-centered approach. In order to measure congruence pertaining to each dyad and separate two equally important components of dyadic congruence (i.e., unique similarity and stereotypical similarity), stereotype adjusted and not-adjusted scores were computed. The results indicated that, with adjusted scores, the effect of the perceptual congruence of dyadic coping was weakened but, for women at least, the effect of perceived similarity remained significant and the variable of couple bond was marginally significant. The results provide preliminary clues to the role of dyadic coping within an interpersonal- and social-based perspective.

**Keywords:** dyadic coping, perceptual congruence, couple relationship satisfaction, stereotype effect, gender differences

Some of the earliest studies of marital satisfaction in the United States (Dymond, 1950; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966) provided the impetus for more recent applications of the interpersonal perception paradigm (Kenny, 1994) to marital relationships. The couple relationship, in fact, can be conceptualized as a process of building a shared reality or shared perceptions of partners' experiences (Berger & Kellner, 1964). Partners shape their knowledge of each other and the relationship within a cognitively interdependent framework in which perceptions and judgments about the partner's traits and behaviors are included. In particular, similarity in perceptions between spouses about the relationship is argued to be a crucial dimension for marital relationship quality (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Deal, Wampler, & Halverson, 1992).

The extent to which spouses share similar perspectives regarding any number of topics and experiences is also called perceptual congruence. Usually, perceptual congruence is calculated by measuring the agreement of partners' interpersonal perceptions, that is the association between partners' perception of one another (Sillars & Scott, 1983). In particular, Acitelli, Douvan, and Veroff (1993) considered three types of perceptual congruence variables which are strongly associated to relationship quality: *perceived similarity*, *actual similarity*, and *understanding*.

Perceived similarity corresponds to the congruence between self-perceptions and the perceptions of the other. Actual similarity is the congruence between partners' self-perceptions. Finally, understanding is when one partner's perception of the other corresponds to the other's self-perception: namely, the accuracy of perception on the part of one partner relative to the other partner's self-perception.

Overall, these three components of perceptual congruence contribute to important relationship dimensions, such as relationship satisfaction (e.g., Acitelli et al., 2001) and relationship stability (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005).

Several studies have shown that *perceived similarity* has a strong connection with several important relational outcomes (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993). Perceived similarity can be considered as a form of projection of one's own characteristics on the other person. This projection, sometimes illusory, may promote a sense of cognitive and emotional connection, perhaps by creating the perception that the partner will meet one's needs or will be understood (Lemay, Pruchno, & Field, 2006), or even by enhancing confidence about the relationship (Schul & Vinokur, 2000). Some recent studies (Bertoni & Iafate, 2005; Iafate, Bertoni, Barni, & Donato, 2009) demonstrated that perceived similarity also predicts couple satisfaction when it applies to negative behaviors (i.e., aggressive conflict styles).

As far as *actual similarity* is concerned, several studies indicated that partners or intimates who are similar to each other are also satisfied with their relationships (Acitelli et al., 2001; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Most studies on this issue have focused exclusively on similarity in personality traits (Gattis et al., 2004; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000); however, other dimensions (e.g., value priorities, attitudes, religious beliefs, marital ideals, commitment) may play an important role as well (Acitelli et al., 2001; Weigel, 2008). Yet, consistent with Gaunt (2006), it is “plausible that some dimensions of similarity contribute more than others to explaining marital satisfaction” (p. 1,402).

Research on *understanding* uniformly supports the crucial role that this dimension plays in close relationships (Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009) and shows that being accurate, that is accurately perceiving and imagining what the other is thinking or doing, promotes partners’ satisfaction and adjustment (Bertoni & Iafra, 2005; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998); along with this perspective, understanding the partner’s characteristics, both his/her strengths and weaknesses, is the key to long-lasting and satisfying couple relationships (Acitelli et al., 2001).

In comparing these three different dimensions of couple perceptual congruence, research has consistently shown that perceived similarity has a stronger positive association with marital satisfaction than does actual similarity (Acitelli et al., 1993; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966). That is, it is more important that partners think they are reciprocal than being actually reciprocal (e.g., Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

In addition, literature on interpersonal perceptions has highlighted two important issues: the one of stereotype effects on partners’ perceptual congruence (e.g., Kenny & Acitelli, 1994; Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986) and the one of the relevance of the referent of perceptions (e.g., Acitelli et al., 2001; Neff & Karney, 2002).

## Stereotype Effect

The literature on interpersonal perception indicates that part of the similarity between partners is due to a stereotype effect, stemming from sharing the same social context. Because both partners are part of a larger sociocultural milieu, they should behave in ways typical of their culture and should be expected to be similar for that reason more than for the unique similarity of their own relationship (Romney et al., 1986). Kenrick and Funder (1988) used the term “stereotype” to refer to the fact that many responses are highly stable within a given culture. Kenny and Acitelli (1994) introduced the expression *stereotype effect* to indicate the extent to which a person’s responses tend to match the profile of responses of other people in the sample. According to Kenny and Acitelli (1994), the stereotype effect needs to be removed to uncover the degree of unique similarity between subjects, that is, “to separate one’s ability to judge others in general from the ability to understand one’s spouse in particular” (p. 429).

Controlling for the stereotype effect can substantially reduce the level of similarity, although this procedure should not be conceived as controlling for error. For example, in the study by Deal, Halverson, and Wampler (1999) on 136 mothers’ and fathers’ behaviors in taking care of preschool children, parents appeared to strongly agree on their preferences for child-rearing strategies, with the average correlation between parents equal to .61. But once stereotype was removed, the agreement declined to .13 (with 80% reduction of the correlation). In a research concerning marital ideals in a sample of 238 dating and married couples, Acitelli and colleagues (2001) found that similarity of relationship ideals between partners, men’s understanding of their female partner’s ideals, and women’s understanding of their male partner’s ideals were significantly reduced when taking stereotype effect out of the analyses. The conclusion the authors drew from these findings is that stereotype (or the typical way of responding) substantially determines individual marital ideals. Nevertheless, once adjustments were made for stereotype, both similarity and understanding were still statistically significant. This means that even when accounting for how congruent a person is with everyone else in the sample, there is still some similarity and understanding that is unique (i.e., idiosyncratic) to a particular couple.

Although Simpson, Orina, and Ickes (2003) noted that perceiving partners within the same social context may foster the link between partners’ interpersonal perceptions and satisfaction, they concluded that perceiving more idiosyncratic aspects of the partner’s behaviors may threaten the relationship itself. That is, if partners are too different from the expected stereotype, such idiosyncratic characteristics or behaviors do not bode well for relationship stability.

## Referent of Perception: The Emerging Construct of Dyadic Coping

As Kenny and Acitelli (1994) pointed out, the importance of interpersonal perceptions in relationships depends on the referent of perception. Presumably, we may state that the consequences of congruence are different depending on what we are observing (Acitelli et al., 2001; Neff & Karney, 2002). For example, Neff and Karney (2002, 2005) demonstrated that partners are more accurate when they perceive specific behaviors of their partner than when they perceive more global features. Moreover the literature confirms that perceptual congruence is more important when the target of perceptions refers to the relationship itself rather than topics that are external to the relationship (e.g., partners’ political opinions, Acitelli et al., 2001). The present research covers new ground by examining perceptual congruence in the context of an emerging construct within the literature on close relationships: dyadic coping. This aspect is quite innovative because interpersonal perception studies have applied the measures of perceptual congruence to contexts such as parenting styles (Deal et al., 1999), marriage ideals (Acitelli et al., 2001), and identity styles (Cook & Jones, 2002), and only a few studies have focused on more genuine

relational constructs and interpersonal domains such as marital conflict (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993, Bertoni & Iafate, 2005). In particular, *dyadic coping* refers to an interdependent process through which couples cope with the stress they encounter in their everyday lives (daily hassles), and it is conceptualized here as the interplay between the stress signals of one partner and the coping reactions of the other (Bodenmann, 1995, 2005; Ledermann et al., 2010). Within this interplay of behaviors, partner A's communication of stress is perceived, decoded, and evaluated by partner B, who in turn responds or does not respond to the emerging stress signals. These responses can be both positive and negative: positive responses include conveying understanding, support, and other behaviors such as taking over the other's duties and responsibilities, or engaging in a joint problem-solving discussion. Negative responses include hostile, ambivalent, or superficial behaviors such as lack of interest, sarcasm, or de-emphasizing the seriousness of the partner's stress. In a longitudinal study, couples who engaged in positive dyadic coping showed less of a decrease in their levels of couple satisfaction than those couples with a poorer dyadic coping ability (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). Moreover, a recent cross-cultural study (Bertoni et al., 2007) on Italian and Swiss couples showed that the more partners engaged in positive dyadic coping, the higher their relationship satisfaction was.

As a relational construct, dyadic coping refers to the process of providing and receiving support in times of stress and, thus, to the quality of the exchange between partners (Revenson, Kayser, & Bodenmann, 2005). Hence, dyadic coping is conceptually linked to the construct of social support.

On the other hand, dyadic coping is also defined as a novel construct that differs from social support in two important aspects. First, within the dyadic coping process, the support provider is not a general other within the social network but the romantic partner. Second, unlike social support, the process of dyadic coping requires both partners to be concerned with each other's well-being so that both partners are considered providers as well as receivers of dyadic coping responses.

Just as social support researchers have highlighted the importance of distinguishing between actual and perceived support (e.g., Schulz & Schwarzer, 2004), similarly, we highlight the importance of distinguishing the process of dyadic coping from how partners perceive it. Extensive research on support exchange, in fact, has shown that perceived support is a stronger predictor of well-being than the actual support behaviors displayed by partners (e.g., Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007; Wethington & Kessler, 1986).

Further, it should be noted that little research has been done on both partners' perceptions of dyadic coping and about how these interpersonal perceptions are related to each other (Berg & Upchurch, 2007). A number of studies have examined both how partner perceives the spouse's involvement and how the spouse perceives his or her own involvement in the context of marriage and chronic illness (Hagedoorn, Buunk, Kuijer, Wobbes, & Sanderman, 2000;

Schulz & Schwarzer, 2004). However, little research has linked the perceptions of both partners in the context of minor stressors such as daily hassles (Iafate et al., 2009).

## The Present Study

The goals of the present study are to replicate previous findings and to extend these findings by investigating interpersonal perceptions in the context of dyadic coping. Theoretically, we propose to extend previous research on perceptual congruence within couples (in particular, Acitelli & colleagues', 1993 model of perceptual congruence) by applying it, for the first time, to the construct of dyadic coping. Further, we intend to integrate earlier findings by examining an important yet unexplored combination of the perceptual congruence variables. In addition, we aim to assess the relation between perceptual congruence of dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction of women and men, both before and after stereotype adjustment.

The link between perceptual congruence and satisfaction, as well as the role of the stereotype effect, in partners' interpersonal perceptions are important issues for family theory and research, especially when referring to a relationship-relevant construct as dyadic coping. Moreover, not only partners' experiences in their own intimate relationships but also the broader social context shared by the partners may influence the way they perceive their coping behaviors. As such, it is important to take social stereotypes into account when studying perceptual congruence in the context of dyadic coping. By examining perceptual congruence variables in the specific and unexplored context of dyadic coping and assessing the role of the stereotype effect, we can construct a more complete picture of the role that interpersonal perceptions play to sustain and/or undermine partners' relationship satisfaction within a specific relational process, the one of dyadic coping. We predict the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* The level of congruence between partners will diminish substantially once controlled for the stereotype effect. That is, we expect the social context that partners share with the other couples in the sample to play a significant role in the congruence of partners' interpersonal perceptions of dyadic coping.

*Hypothesis 2:* Perceived similarity in dyadic coping will be a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than actual similarity.

*Hypothesis 3:* The link between perceptual congruence variables and relationship satisfaction will become weaker once the stereotype effect is controlled.

Due to prior reports showing that relationship satisfaction varies as a function of the relationship status (i.e., married vs. unmarried), duration, as well as the stage of the life cycle

(i.e., age of partners), these variables will be controlled for and preliminarily explored.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 281 heterosexual married or unmarried couples residing in Northern Italy. Participants were initially recruited among unmarried college students who were involved into a romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Those not involved in an intimate relationship were asked to provide contacts of married couples, not their parents, willing to participate in the research. A trained research assistant contacted these latter participants by telephone, sent them questionnaires by mail, and supervised the entire process of recruitment.

Married couples constituted 58% of the sample. Unmarried couples were not cohabiting. As is usual in Italy, when unmarried partners are students, they generally do not live together but with their parents. The average duration of the relationship of the unmarried couples was 3.92 years ( $SD = 3.01$ ; range 1–17 years) and the duration of the relationship of married couples was 19.86 years ( $SD = 9.55$ ; range 2–35 years). Unmarried women's ages ranged from 19 to 47, and the mean age was 23.49 ( $SD = 4.52$ ); unmarried men's ages ranged from 18 to 53, and the mean age was 26.37 ( $SD = 6.37$ ). Married women's ages ranged from 22 to 59, and the mean age was 41.72 ( $SD = 9.62$ ); married men's ages ranged from 22 to 60, and the mean age was 44.98 ( $SD = 10.46$ ).

Education levels were reported to be 50.45% (women) and 45.86% (men) as high school graduate; 31.19% (women) and 33.08% (men) as college graduate. Participants' number of children ranged from 0 to 6 with 1.23 child on average ( $SD = 1.22$ ).

As for personal income, among unmarried respondents 66% of women and 30% of men were without income, 29% of women and 28% of men were below 20,000 € per year, 5% of women and 31% of men were from 21,000 € to 40,000 €, and no women and 11% of men were above 40,000 €. As for married respondents, 18% of women and no men were without income, while 31% of women and 5% of men were below 20,000 €, 47% of women and 46% of men were from 21,000 € to 40,000 €, 3% of women and 29% of men were between 41,000 € and 60,000 €, and 1% of women and 20% of men were above 60,000 €. The population average income in Northern Italy is between 16,000 € and 20,000 € (Eurostat, 2008).

### Measures

Participants were administered a self-report questionnaire in two versions (one for each partner). There were two measures (explained below). Each measure was forward-backward-forward linguistically validated into Italian from German. The resulting versions of the scales have shown

similar factor structure and psychometric features like the original (Donato et al., 2009).

### Dyadic Coping Questionnaire (FDCT-N; Bodenmann, 2000)

As a measure of dyadic coping, this scale is composed of 41 items and assesses the process of dyadic coping in the couple (stress communication, exchange of dyadic coping, common dyadic coping, satisfaction about dyadic coping, and effectiveness of dyadic coping). In the present study, we considered only the 24 items of the dyadic coping exchange dimension, which refers to partners' dyadic coping responses to each other, and two versions allow us to measure both self-perceptions ( $\alpha$  for women = .81;  $\alpha$  for men = .75) and the perceptions of the other ( $\alpha$  for women = .76;  $\alpha$  for men = .71). These items measure partners' dyadic coping responses to the other's stress signals (12 items for self-perceptions and 12 items for the perceptions of the other). Item examples are: "I take on things that my partner would normally do in order to help him/her out"; "My partner takes on things that I would normally do in order to help me out"; "I listen to my partner, give him/her the opportunity to express his/her stress, comfort and encourage him/her"; "My partner listens to me, gives me the opportunity to express my stress, comforts and encourages me." The items were administered on a 5-point scale (from 1 = *never*, to 5 = *very often*). For the purpose of computing perceptual congruence variables a subset of 20 items was retained, and 4 items (2 for self-perceptions and 2 for perceptions of the other) were omitted because their response distributions were highly skewed and kurtotic.

### The Partnership Questionnaire (Hahlweg, 1996)

As a measure of relationship satisfaction, this scale is composed of 31 items and determines the perceived quality of the relationship through items like: "My partner says he/she enjoys my company"; "My partner and I make plans for our future." The items were administered on a 4-point scale (from 1 = *never*, to 4 = *very often*). The scale showed a good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$  for women;  $\alpha = .78$  for men).

### Conceptual and Analytic Strategy

We provide a detailed description of the perceptual congruence variables as they take on specific meanings within the context of dyadic coping.

Perceived similarity compares one partner's perception of his/her own coping response (partner A's self-perception) with his/her own perception of the other partner's coping response (partner A's perception of the other). Thus, perceived similarity assesses the extent to which one partner perceives what he/she provides to the other as similar to what he/she receives from the other in terms of support in times of stress.

Actual similarity compares the self-perceptions of each partner of his/her own coping response and expresses how

similar partners are in responding with their coping efforts to the other's stress signals. In the paper this level of congruence is called *actual similarity in providing*.

Understanding is defined by congruence between one partner's perception of the other partner's dyadic coping and the other partner's perception of his/her own dyadic coping. So, we refer here to the ability of each couple member in recognizing accurately what the other partner provides. Understanding is thus an index of how much one partner sees the other as the other sees him/herself.

In our study, we added two other measures that were not considered in the previous model (Acitelli et al., 1993). One measure refers to how similar partners are in perceiving that they receive a coping response from the other. We call this measure *actual similarity in receiving*. This measure compares each partner's perception of the other partner's propensity (or non-propensity) to engage in dyadic coping and should be differentiated from the actual similarity in providing.

Finally, the last variable is what we called the *couple bond*, that is, the reciprocal understanding of what partners provide and receive from each other. This reciprocal understanding is the mean of the two partners' understanding scores. Although the mean of partners' scores cannot provide how much each one contributes individually, this variable tells us what level of understanding is present in the couple as a whole. We called this variable couple bond as the comparison (i.e., congruence or incongruence) between both partners' mutual understanding is a relational level variable which includes and exceeds their reciprocal individual understanding (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

The indices of perceptual congruence of dyadic coping were computed using within-dyad correlations, which are correlations across items within each couple (Bernieri, Zuckerman, Koestner, & Rosenthal, 1994; Kenny & Acitelli, 1994). This was true for all congruence variables except for perceived similarity, which was computed correlating, in a traditional within-person way, each partner's perception of his/her own coping response (partner A's self-perception) with his/her own perception of the other partner's coping response (partner A's perception of the other).

In within-dyad correlations the dyad is the unit of examination. In other words, we computed profile similarity indices for each couple by correlating the male partner's and female partner's responses across the items of the FDCT-N as summarized below. This procedure generated the following dyadic scores:

*Women's perceived similarity:* Correlation between the woman's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items) and the woman's perception of her partner's dyadic coping (10 items).

*Men's perceived similarity:* Correlation between the man's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items) and the man's perception of his partner's dyadic coping (10 items).

*Actual similarity in providing:* Within-dyad correlation between the woman's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items) and the man's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items).

*Actual similarity in receiving:* Within-dyad correlation between the woman's perception of her partner's dyadic coping (10 items) and the man's perception of his partner's dyadic coping (10 items).

*Men's understanding:* Within-dyad correlation between the woman's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items) and the man's perception of his partner's dyadic coping (10 items).

*Women's understanding:* Within-dyad correlation between the man's self-perception of dyadic coping (10 items) and the woman's perception of her partner's dyadic coping (10 items).

*Couple bond:* Computation of the mean of the two understanding scores (men's and women's) as computed here above.

Just like any other correlation coefficient, the within-dyad correlation can range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ : positive correlations indicate that respondents are similar in terms of the profiles of their ratings, whereas negative correlations suggest that respondents are opposite.

Because our independent variables (the perceptual congruence measures) were correlations, we performed the analyses on transformed  $r$  to  $z$  scores. The scores were standardized with the following formula:  $z = \ln[(r + 1)/(r - 1)]/2$  (Rosenthal, 1991).

Finally, as suggested by Kenny and Acitelli (1994), we operationalized the stereotype effect as the mean response across subjects; specifically, we computed the mean across men for each FDCT-N item and the mean across women for each FDCT-N item. To create congruence variables adjusted for stereotype effects, we subtracted the means of the variables before computing the dyadic indices. We then correlated the sets of adjusted scores for each couple.

To test whether unadjusted and adjusted mean scores were significantly different (Hypothesis 1), we compared unadjusted and adjusted scores by computing a paired sample  $t$  test on Fisher  $r$ -to- $z$  transformed within-dyad correlations.

In order to test the predictive power of perceptual congruence measures on relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2) and the effect of stereotype adjustment on the link between perceptual congruence variables and relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 3), we conducted two multiple regression analyses for women and men separately. Then, we replicated the analyses with perceptual congruence scores adjusted for stereotype.

To control for participants' marital status (married vs. unmarried), duration of relationship, and partners' age, these variables were entered in the regression model. The effects of these variables were not significant. Moreover, there were no significant differences in the links between perceptual congruence measures and relationship satisfaction when controlling for these variables. Thus, we decided to exclude them from the analyses. Finally, in Tables 2 and 3 we also included variance inflation factor (VIF) scores to measure multicollinearity among predictors. VIF scores can vary from 1 to infinity, where lower scores indicate lower

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of perceptual congruence variables

	Unadjusted stereotype		Adjusted stereotype		<i>t</i> test (unadjusted vs. adjusted)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Women's perceived similarity	1.17***	.69	.48***	.65	15.86***
Men's perceived similarity	1.24***	.63	.46***	.62	19.95***
Actual similarity in providing	1.12***	.57	.21***	.52	23.82***
Actual similarity in receiving	1.06***	.64	.30***	.62	19.21***
Couple bond	1.06***	.52	.27***	.41	23.41***

Note. Reported values refer to Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformed within-dyad correlation.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Table 2. Results of multiple regression analyses for women's satisfaction

Women's satisfaction	Not adjusted for stereotype					Adjusted for stereotype				
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Zero-order <i>r</i>	VIF	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Zero-order <i>r</i>	VIF
Women's perceived similarity	.37	3.913	$p < .001$	.43	2.36	.16	2.161	$p < .05$	.16	1.15
Men's perceived similarity	.02	.244	ns	.22	2.03	.02	.322	ns	.05	1.19
Actual similarity in providing	-.20	-1.934	ns	.23	2.77	-.01	-.166	ns	.09	1.62
Actual similarity in receiving	-.18	-1.640	ns	.30	3.07	-.20	-2.516	$p < .05$	-.06	1.47
Couple bond	.40	2.724	$p < .01$	.38	5.62	.19	1.902	$p = .059$	.12	2.14

$F(5, 208) = 11.576; p < .001; R^2 = .22$        $F(5, 211) = 2,659; p < .05; R^2 = .06$

Table 3. Results of multiple regression analyses for men's satisfaction

Men's satisfaction	Not adjusted for stereotype					Adjusted for stereotype				
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Zero-order <i>r</i>	VIF	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Zero-order <i>r</i>	VIF
Women's perceived similarity	.05	.649	ns	.32	2.36	.10	1.464	ns	.14	1.15
Men's perceived similarity	.18	2.095	$p < .05$	.37	2.03	.05	.649	ns	.10	1.19
Actual similarity in providing	-.11	-1.056	ns	.31	2.77	-.04	-.440	ns	.14	1.62
Actual similarity in receiving	-.03	-.236	ns	.34	3.07	-.12	-1.447	ns	.02	1.47
Couple bond	.36	2.440	$p < .05$	.42	5.62	.16	1.604	ns	.17	2.14

$F(5, 208) = 10.248; p < .001; R^2 = .20$        $F(5, 211) = 2,174; ns; R^2 = .05$

collinearity while higher scores stand for higher collinearity. As a rule of thumb, VIF values  $< 10$  are considered satisfactory (Kutner, Nachtsheim, & Neter, 2004). VIF scores shown in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that multicollinearity was not a problem for the analyses.

## Results

As expected (Hypothesis 1), when stereotype adjustment was performed, perceptual congruence variables were significantly reduced (see Table 1).

Results of the regressions before stereotype adjustment indicate that the model accounted for 22% of the variance in women's satisfaction (Table 2) and 20% of the variance in men's satisfaction (Table 3). The relationship satisfaction

of both partners was predicted by perceived similarity ( $\beta = .37$  for women,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .18$  for men,  $p < .05$ ) and couple bond ( $\beta = .40$  for women,  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta = .36$  for men,  $p < .05$ ). For both partners, couple bond had the strongest predictive power. Neither women's nor men's actual similarity predicted their partner's relationship satisfaction. Confirming Hypothesis 2, in both women and men, perceived similarity was a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than actual similarity in providing and receiving.

Results of regressions after stereotype adjustment show that the model accounted for 6% of the variance in women's satisfaction (Table 2) and 5% (ns) for men's satisfaction (Table 3). For women only, perceived similarity ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and actual similarity in receiving ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of their relationship satisfaction, but in opposite directions. Couple bond showed a

tendency toward significance ( $\beta = .19, p = .059$ ), whereas actual similarity in providing and men's perceived similarity were not significant predictors. Overall, for men none of the variables, once adjusted for stereotype effects, predicted their relationship satisfaction.

As expected (Hypothesis 3), stereotype adjustment weakened the link between perceptual congruence variables and relationship satisfaction. In particular, once the stereotype effects were removed from men's measures, none of them revealed a significant association with satisfaction, whereas for women, perceived similarity remained significant even when adjusted, and the negative influence of actual similarity in receiving on women's satisfaction held the highest beta weight among the results with the adjusted variables.

## Discussion

The contribution of this study is theoretical and methodological: from a theoretical point of view we extended previous research on perceptual congruence within couples by applying it to the construct of dyadic coping. In addition, we introduced new variables (i.e., actual similarity in receiving and couple bond) that in earlier works would make little sense because the perceptual congruence variables were examined in the context of individual perceptions of the other. In the context of dyadic coping, these variables demonstrate how perceptual congruence can be indicative of perceptions of the relationship itself.

From a methodological standpoint, we also wanted to test the association between perceptual congruence of dyadic coping and relationship satisfaction with predictors that were adjusted and not adjusted for the stereotype effect. Stereotype adjustment showed that a good deal of perceptual congruence is determined by the broader social context that the partners share, which prescribes norms and expectations related to the exchange of support within a couple in times of stress. It is well known that people base their judgments of others on prototypical social knowledge (Karniol, 2003). For instance, intimates view their partners as typical; that is, they believe their partners value qualities of the relationship that are commonly valued by others (e.g., having a trusting partner) and do not value qualities that are not commonly valued by others (Acitelli et al., 2001).

Our findings also demonstrate that the predictive power of perceptual congruence variables is decreased when we consider stereotypical or unique aspects of the exchange within the couple. However, for women, the congruence measures remain significant predictors when they expressed both stereotypical and unique aspects of the exchange.

In particular, the analyses (before stereotype adjustment) showed that the most predictive variable with regard to both partners' relationship satisfaction was couple bond. As stated earlier, this variable provides a measure of the level of understanding that exists within each couple as a whole. Owing to the lack of literature on this type of construct, we did not make predictions about the couple bond and

we believe that further research is needed on the role this dimension can play for other relationship outcomes.

The other important predictor in our analyses was perceived similarity, a measure that compared perceptions of the coping response of each person (provided to the partner) and his/her own perception of the partner's dyadic coping. Consistent with theoretical perspectives that emphasized the interpersonal functions of social cognition (Lemay et al., 2006; Murray, 1999) and with studies that investigated the link between perceived similarity and relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 2001; Deal et al., 1992; Weigel, 2008), we found evidence that perceived similarity is associated with partners' satisfaction also in the context of dyadic coping. It is noteworthy that perceived similarity, when referring to dyadic coping, measures not only how partners perceive themselves as similar in dyadic coping but also how each member of the couple perceives the congruence between what they provide to and what they receive from the partner. In this specific context, therefore, it is interesting to highlight how couple satisfaction is associated with the perception of an equitable exchange within the couple. Several studies demonstrate the importance of equity in close relationships (Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008; Kleiboer, Kuijer, Hox, Schreurs, & Bensing, 2006; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

The associations between partners' satisfaction and actual similarity in providing and in receiving were not significant. These results suggest that being similar in what partners actually give and receive from each other does not influence couple satisfaction. The finding is in line with other evidence highlighting the absence of association between actual similarity and relationship satisfaction (Gattis et al., 2004) and the presence of a stronger link between perceived (rather than actual) similarity and relationship satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 1993).

Removing the effect of partners' stereotype endorsement from the measures resulted in a decrease as for explained variance. Nevertheless, at least for women, the regression model was still significant. This result appears particularly interesting, if we consider that previous studies, investigating the link between perceptual congruence variables and marital quality (Kenny & Acitelli, 1994) after removal of stereotype effects, have found no such a link or a substantial reduction in the level of significance in both men and women (Lemay et al., 2006). None of the variables predicted men's satisfaction after adjusting for stereotype, whereas for women the effect of perceived similarity was weakened but still significant. The effect of couple bond was marginally significant. This result suggests that, at least for women, unique similarity of couple members remains relevant for their satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 2001).

With regard to the actual similarity in receiving, our findings suggest, at first glance, that being similar in what partners provide to each other or receive from each other, especially when reflecting the unique similarity within the couple (stereotype adjusted scores), might be somehow detrimental for women's relationship satisfaction. We suggest that being similar in what partners offer to each other and especially what they receive from each other, in terms of

dyadic coping, might leave partners with a narrower range of coping strategies. In many situations, in fact, complementarity of dyadic coping efforts can be more functional to the couple well-being (Revenson, 1994, 2003). In other words, the negative association seems to suggest the importance of complementarity (rather than similarity) of partners' coping behaviors: being too similar might not be good for couples, and effective or ineffective dyadic coping seems to matter most. However, more research is needed as there are certainly other possible mechanisms that may account for this unexpected negative relationship.

These findings are also to be interpreted in light of the limitations of the present study. First, the use of a convenience sample limits generalizability of results to a broader population. Second, the correlational nature of the present work did not allow specification of the direction of effects.

## Conclusions

From a psychosocial point of view, the results of the analyses conducted with stereotype correction indicate that, even if partners share the same milieu on coping exchanges within couples, women's satisfaction is still linked to the specific congruence with their specific partners and, thus, on the uniqueness of their relationships. Once again women reveal themselves as sensitive to the relationship dynamics and the sense of connection, both cognitively and emotionally. Future studies should explore these gender differences more in detail.

From a clinical point of view, our findings indicate how the many dyadic coping enhancement programs, both preventive and therapeutically oriented, should take the social background as well as perceptual congruence of coping behaviors into account. As suggested by the results, knowing that partners give and take equitably may be more important than the recognition of each partner's coping skills separately. The results of this investigation, supporting the greater impact of perceived congruence over that of actual congruence, are of clinical importance and can inform the variety of interventions in marital distress prevention programs or in marital therapy more generally.

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