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# Investigating the Role of Two Types of Understanding in Relationship Well-Being: Understanding Is More Important Than Knowledge

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*Understanding is at the heart of intimate relationships. It is unclear, however, whether understanding—partners' subjective feeling that they understand each other—or knowledge—partners' accurate knowledge of each other—is more important for relationship well-being. The present article pits these two types of understanding against each other and investigates their effects on relationship well-being. In a prospective study among 199 newlywed couples, partners' self-reported and perceived understanding and their knowledge in different domains were assessed. Understanding was independent of knowledge. Self-reported and perceived understanding predicted relationship well-being but neither type of knowledge did. Thus, subjectively feeling that one understands and is understood by one's partner appears to be more important to relationship well-being than actually knowing and being known by one's partner.*

**Keywords:** *understanding; knowledge; interpersonal perception; couple well-being; accuracy*

Like people and researchers alike agree that understanding is at the heart of close relationships. Researchers differ, however, in their conceptualization of understanding in interpersonal settings (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2009). Some researchers investigate the effect of subjective understanding on relationship well-being, thus, partners' feeling that they understand each other. Other researchers investigate the effect of actual knowledge on relationship well-being, thus, partners' accurate knowledge about each others' traits and preferences. Intuitively, both types of understanding should be

related and contribute to the maintenance of happy relationships. Knowledge about one's partner's traits, preferences, and behavior should enhance the feeling that one understands one's partner. Moreover, the coordination of daily life and activities should be easier and relationships should be more harmonious when both partners know each other and subjectively feel that they understand each other. Surprisingly, research has investigated both types of understanding separately and questions regarding their interrelation and link with relationship well-being remain unanswered. The present study aims to integrate the two lines of research on understanding and relationship well-being. It investigates (a) how understanding and knowledge are related, (b) whether both types of understanding predict relationship well-being, and (c) which type of understanding is more important for relationship well-being. The present study thereby examines a previously unexplored combination of theories and empirical paradigms on both types of

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understanding to illuminate when and why understanding contributes to relationship well-being.

### UNDERSTANDING AND WELL-BEING

We define *understanding* as people's subjective feeling that they understand their partner and that they are understood by their partner. Understanding, according to this definition, is assessed within persons because it concerns one person's perception of the extent to which he or she understands others and is understood by others (Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007). For every partner in a dyadic relationship, understanding includes four facets that may be related but can be independent. First, understanding includes *self-reported understanding* (e.g., Mary feels she understands John). Second, it includes *perceived understanding* (e.g., Mary feels that John understands her). Third, it includes *partner-reported understanding* (e.g., John feels that he understands Mary; a partner effect). Fourth, understanding may be reciprocal as *partner-reported and perceived understanding* may reinforce each other (e.g., because John feels he understands Mary, she perceives him as understanding). To fully appreciate the role of understanding in relational well-being, then, all four aspects of understanding need to be taken into consideration.

Research uniformly supports the crucial role understanding plays in close relationships (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Lemay et al., 2007; Swann & Gill, 1997; Weger, 2005). For example, self-reported understanding is closely related to confidence in knowing one's partner, which is related to relationship well-being (Swann & Gill, 1997). Perceived understanding is closely related to self-verification, part of which is defined as the feeling that one is understood by the partner (Weger, 2005), which is also known to contribute to relationship well-being. Furthermore, both self-reported and perceived understanding are crucial to interpersonal responsiveness as defined by Reis and colleagues (Reis, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), which is essential to fostering security, intimacy, trust, and closeness between partners. For example, Lemay et al. (2007) conducted three studies that examine the relative importance of self-reported and perceived responsiveness for relationship satisfaction and support. Consistent with expectations, perceived responsiveness was a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than was self-reported responsiveness. Thus, feeling understood by one's partner was more important to people's satisfaction with their relationship than was feeling that one understands one's partner, further underlining the subjective nature of feeling understood (cf. Reis & Shaver, 1988). Also, people based their perception of

their partner's responsiveness on their partner's actual responsiveness, indicating that feeling understood by one's partner is partly anchored in reality (cf. Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Reis et al., 2004). It is therefore important to also investigate the partner effect of understanding, thus, whether the understanding reported by the partner influences people's own satisfaction with the relationship. Furthermore, it is conceivable that perceived understanding affects relationship well-being only if it reflects understanding how the partner actually is (cf. Lemay et al., 2007). It thus seems necessary to investigate the interaction effect between perceived and partner-reported understanding for relational well-being.

In line with these findings, we hypothesize that self-reported, perceived, and partner-reported understanding predict relationship well-being. Additionally, we hypothesize that perceived and partner-reported understanding reinforce each other in that the effect of Partner B's perceived understanding on well-being is especially high when Partner A reports high understanding.

### KNOWLEDGE AND WELL-BEING

The second type of understanding is *knowledge*, which we define as people's accurate knowledge of their partner's traits and behaviors. Knowledge, according to this definition, is assessed between partners and captures how accurately one person knows his or her partner by considering whether a person's perception of the partner corresponds to the partner's perception of himself or herself (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). In the literature knowledge is also labeled as accuracy (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005), understanding (e.g., Sillars et al., 1984), and empathic accuracy (e.g., Ickes, 2003).

Intuitively, knowledge should contribute to the maintenance of happy relationships. The coordination of daily life and activities should be easier and the relationships should be more harmonious when partners know each other. Also, partners' knowledge of each other should provide them with a sense that they are able to predict their partner. This perception of predictability of the partner should provide them with a feeling of control, which is a key aspect in successful social relationships (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Furthermore, being known by the partner is beneficial for people's self-verification (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). In established relationships, people value the other's capacity to identify their weaknesses and strengths, and they report greater intimacy when their partner has a more accurate view of their characteristics. Thus, both knowing and being known by the partner should contribute to relationship well-being.

Although the assumption that knowledge contributes to relationship well-being is appealing, evidence on the link between knowledge and relationship well-being is mixed. Nevertheless, research has identified four moderators to explain when and under which conditions knowledge is linked to relationship well-being.

The first moderator is the *abstractness versus concreteness of knowledge*. Neff and Karney (2005) assessed partners' abstract and concrete knowledge about each other. They reasoned that partners are more motivated to see each other in a positive light when they perceive each others' abstract traits (e.g., wonderful) rather than more concrete traits (e.g., punctual). Partners should therefore have more accurate knowledge about each other on concrete traits than abstract traits. More importantly, only concrete knowledge should provide partners with a feeling of control, which should enhance relationship well-being. Consistent with predictions, only knowledge about concrete traits (and for wives only) predicted feelings of marital control and reduced the likelihood of divorce 4 years later.

The second moderator is the *relationship relevance* of the knowledge. Arguing that partners achieve pragmatic accuracy, Gill and Swann (2004) hypothesized and found that partners have more accurate knowledge on issues that are relevant to the relationship. Importantly, only this relationship-relevant knowledge was related to harmony in the relationship.

The third moderator is the *valence* of the knowledge, including actions or cognitions that are positive or negative for the relationship. To illustrate, Ickes and colleagues (Ickes, 2003; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson, Orina, & Ickes, 2003) distinguished between knowledge of one's partner's positive or negative thoughts about the relationship. To establish knowledge, these authors videotaped interactions between partners who subsequently rated their own and their partner's thoughts and feelings during that interaction. Knowledge about the partner's negative thoughts and behaviors should be deleterious for the relationship because knowing that one's partner thinks negatively about the relationship is threatening. Consistent with this reasoning, the more accurately partners inferred each other's negative thoughts, the less close they felt.

The fourth moderator examined in the literature is *relationship duration*. In their study, Thomas and Fletcher (2003) found that knowledge about the partner's thoughts during a videotaped interaction was positively related to relationship satisfaction for longer relationships but negatively related to relationship satisfaction for shorter relationships (i.e., less than 11 months). Similar to Ickes (2003), the authors argued that accurate knowledge in short relationships may be experienced as too threatening and is therefore negatively related to

relationship well-being. Furthermore, relationship duration may also moderate the effect of knowledge on the partner's relationship well-being, at least, if this knowledge is communicated to the partner. Indeed, Campbell, Lackenbauer, and Muise (2006) found that verifying feedback from one partner (which is based on accurate knowledge) produces greater feelings of intimacy in the other partner in longer as compared to shorter relationships.

To sum up, the general hypothesis that accurately knowing one's partner is beneficial to relationship well-being has not been supported. Instead, the literature has identified four moderating factors suggesting that knowing one's partner enhances relationship well-being when knowledge is (a) concrete, (b) relationship relevant, (c) concerns positive information, and when it (d) emerges in long relationships. In addition to these moderators that are directly related to the type of knowledge, the literature has identified *gender* as a factor affecting the link between knowledge and relational well-being in that women's knowledge showed stronger links with marital well-being (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Murstein & Beck, 1972). To examine this possibility, we investigate whether gender modulates the link between knowledge and relational well-being.

The present study seeks not only to replicate previous findings but also to extend these findings by investigating all four moderators of type of knowledge in a prospective study among a large sample of newlywed couples. By integrating an as yet unexplored combination of moderators of knowledge and including the partner effect of knowledge, we can paint a more complete picture on the conditions under which partners' knowledge about each other is conducive to relationship well-being.

## UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, AND RELATIONSHIP WELL-BEING

To our knowledge, there is no study that systematically investigates both types of understanding and their link with relationship well-being. It thus remains unclear whether and how they facilitate the maintenance of happy and long-lasting relationships. Specifically, it remains unclear whether they uniquely contribute to relationship well-being. The final goal of the present investigation, then, is to examine which type of understanding is more important for relationship well-being.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The overarching hypothesis guiding the present work is the claim that understanding and knowledge facilitate

relationship well-being. In a prospective study among 199 newlywed couples we investigate this claim. Because relationship well-being is likely to decline during the 1st year of marriage (Tucker & Aron, 1993), this sample is especially suited to investigate changes in relationship well-being. We examine both understanding and knowledge on average 2 months after the couple's wedding and again 9 months later. By examining both types of understanding simultaneously, the first aim of the present research is to investigate their interrelation. Second, we examine the unique contribution of understanding to well-being, including *actor effects* (e.g., Mary feels that she understands John, which increases *her* relationship well-being) and *partner effects* (e.g., Mary feels that she understands John, which increases *his* relationship well-being; e.g., Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny, 1996). We predict that people will be happier with their relationship when they feel they understand their partner (i.e., self-reported understanding), they feel understood by their partner (perceived understanding), and their partner feels he or she understands them (i.e., partner-reported understanding). Third, we examine the unique contribution of knowledge on well-being, also including both actor and partner effects. We predict that people will be happier with their relationship when they have specific types of knowledge about their partner (see previously described moderators) and when their partner has specific types of knowledge about them. Fourth, our study allows us to compare the effects of understanding and knowledge to answer the question of which type of understanding is more important for relationship well-being. Additionally, the prospective design of our study allows us to examine the long-term effects of understanding and knowledge on relationship well-being.

## METHOD

### Participants

The data used for this study are derived from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the Search for Inter-Personal Accuracy Project, a longitudinal study among newlywed couples (Finkenauer, 2006). Participants were 199 newlywed couples that were recruited via the municipalities where they got married. Criteria for participation in the study were that for both partners this was their first marriage, couples had no children in this marriage or from previous relationship partners, and partners were between 25 and 40 years old. They completed the first wave of this study within 3 months after marriage and completed the second wave approximately 9 months after their first participation. At Time 1 the mean age of husbands was 32.07 years ( $SD = 4.86$ ) and of wives was

29.20 years ( $SD = 4.28$ ). Couples had been romantically involved for an average of 5.71 years ( $SD = 3.03$ ) and had been living together for an average of 3.81 years ( $SD = 2.31$ ). Nearly all couples (98.5% of the husbands and 96.4% of the wives) were Dutch. About 29% of the husbands and 25% of the wives had followed lower-level education that prepares for blue-collar work, 10% of the husbands and 9% of the wives had followed middle education that prepares for higher professional work, and 54% of the husbands and 63% of the wives had followed higher education that prepares for university. Seven percent of the husbands and 4% of the wives reported having followed other types of education, including obtaining a university degree. At Time 2, 195 couples (98%) still participated in the study, analyses on Time 2 data are based on those 195 couples.

### Procedure

Trained interviewers contacted the couples to make an appointment for the interview. Interviews were conducted at home in the presence of the interviewer. At both time points both members of the couple separately filled out an extensive questionnaire that took about 90 min to complete. Partners were instructed not to discuss the questions or answers with each other; where possible, partners were seated in separate rooms. After the interviews, couples had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. A summary of the results was provided on a Web site that participants were invited to visit (Finkenauer, 2008). For each wave, each couple received 15 euros and a book after they completed the questionnaire.

### Measures

**Understanding.** To assess *understanding*, we used the understanding subscale of the responsiveness scale developed by Reis and his colleagues (e.g., Birnbaum & Reis, 2006). This subscale includes six items that measure felt understanding of the partner. Sample items are "I know my partner well" and "I understand my partner." Partners rated the items for themselves to assess *self-reported understanding* and rated parallel items for their partner to assess *perceived understanding* by the partner (e.g., "My partner understands me well"). Partners rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 5 = *agree completely*). Reliability for the understanding scale for husbands' self-reports was  $\alpha = .79$ , for wives' self-reports was  $\alpha = .85$ , for husbands' perceived understanding was  $\alpha = .87$ , and for wives' perceived understanding was  $\alpha = .88$ .

**Knowledge.** To assess *knowledge* we asked partners to fill out several scales for themselves and for their partners, which allowed us to compare ratings given for



the partner with the partner's self-ratings to establish knowledge scores.

To assess partner's *abstract knowledge*, we used the 30-item version of the Dutch adaptation (Gerris et al., 1998; see also Branje, Van Lieshout, & Van Aken, 2004) of the Big Five factors markers from Goldberg (1992). This BIG-5 scale comprises five dimensions: *agreeableness* (e.g., helpful), *extraversion* (e.g., talkative), *conscientiousness* (e.g., neat), *neuroticism* (e.g., irritable), and *openness to experience* (e.g., creative); each subscale is represented by six traits and participants are asked to report to what extent they possess a given trait on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

To assess *concrete knowledge*, partners rated their and their partner's preferences for certain dishes in restaurants. Most couples have dinner together on a regular basis. Because people can observe their partner's preferences, knowledge about one's partner's food preferences is concrete and available. We selected 12 dishes from different restaurants' menus (e.g., fried shrimp [8 pieces] with a hot garlic sauce) and asked partners to indicate whether they and their partner would order this dish in a restaurant (*no* vs. *yes*).

To assess *relationship-relevant knowledge*, we used an adapted version of the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Brown, 2003). Because research has shown that spouses recognize that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993), knowledge about forgiveness seems particularly relevant to relationships. On four items participants reported how they usually respond when their partner offends them (e.g., "I tend to get over it quickly when my wife [husband] hurts my feelings") and how their partner usually responds to them when they offend their partner (e.g., "My wife [husband] tends to get over it quickly when I hurt her [his] feelings") on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, 5 = *completely true*).

To assess *valence of knowledge*, we used a scale with eight positive and seven negative behaviors similar those used by Gable, Reis, and Downey (2003). Partners reported whether they had enacted the behaviors toward their partner during the previous week. Also, participants reported whether their partner had enacted the same behavior toward them. An example of a *positive behavior* is: "Did you say 'I love you' to your husband in the past week?" and an example of a *negative behavior* is: "Did you say something that hurt your partner's feelings in the past week?"

Additionally, at the end of the questionnaire we asked participants to estimate, on a 6-point scale, what percentage of the questions about their partner they answered in concordance with what the partner answered (1 = 0-20%; 2 = 20-40%; 3 = 40-55%; 4 = 55-70%; 5 = 70-85%; 6 = 85-100%).

*Relationship well-being.* To assess relationship well-being, we used three indicators. First, we used the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), which measures *dyadic adjustment* and taps components of couple functioning such as agreement regarding important values (religion, decision making), conflict management, and expressions of love and affection (e.g., "Do you confide in your partner?" 1 = *never*, 5 = *all the time*). Reliability was good for husband as well as for wives ( $\alpha$ s = .87 and .86, respectively). Second, we assessed *intimacy* with the intimacy subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Questionnaire (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The intimacy subscale consists of 3 items (e.g., "How intimate is your relationship?"). Partners rated the items on 5-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*). Reliability of the scale was good for husbands as well as for wives ( $\alpha$ s = .85 and .83, respectively). Finally, we assessed *trust* in the partner by using the Rempel and Holmes (1986) Trust Scale. The scale comprises three components: predictability, dependability, and faith (Rempel & Holmes, 1986). Sample items are "My partner behaves in a very consistent manner"; "I have found that my partner is unusually dependable, especially when it comes to things which are important to me"; and "I know that my partner will never betray me, even if he or she had the opportunity." The scale consist of 12 items; ratings were given on 5-point scales (1 = *is not at all true*, 5 = *is completely true*). Reliability of the scale was good for husbands as well as for wives ( $\alpha$ s = .84 and .82, respectively).

## RESULTS

After discussing the statistical details of our analyses, we present descriptive findings. Second, we examine whether and how understanding and knowledge are related. Third, we examine whether and how understanding is related to relationship well-being. Fourth, we examine whether and how knowledge is related to relationship well-being. Finally, we compare the effect of understanding and knowledge on well-being.

### *Computation of Knowledge Scores*

Using the scales described in the Method section to assess knowledge, we calculated three types of knowledge scores. For the dichotomous scales (food preferences and behaviors), knowledge scores were established by summing hits (i.e., both partners reported that one of them enacted a particular behavior during the previous week) and correct rejections for each partner (i.e., both partners reported that one of them did not enact a particular behavior during the previous week; cf. Gable

et al., 2003). For example, when Mary reports having told John that she loves him, and John reports that Mary told him she loves him, the agreement is coded as a hit for John. When Mary reports not having told John that she loves him, and John reports that Mary did not tell him she loves him, the agreement is coded as correct rejection for John. Because both indicate accurate knowledge, summing hits and correct rejections for each partner yields a score that indicates more accurate knowledge the higher the score. For behaviors enacted toward the partner, we calculated hits and correct rejections separately for the eight positive and seven negative behaviors.

Knowledge scores for the continuous scales were calculated using item-based correlations. Ever since Cronbach and colleagues (Cronbach, 1955; Gage & Cronbach, 1955) wrote their influential papers on the conceptual problems with interpersonal perception scores, we know that knowledge scores do not only reflect specific knowledge about the target but may be inflated by similar response biases in perceivers and targets. The advantage of item-based correlations is that they control for inflation due to the response biases elevation and differential elevation (Sillars et al., 1984). Following the procedure of Sillars et al. (1984), we calculated two types of item-based correlations: *raw knowledge* as simple item-based correlations and *adjusted knowledge* as item-based partial correlations. The partial correlations between the individual's perception of the partner and the partner's actual response are controlled for in the individual's own response (for more information, see Sillars et al., 1984). Adjusted knowledge thereby controls for similarity in response biases.

It is important to note that these correlational indices cannot be calculated for couples in which one or both spouses give the same response on every item of a scale. To calculate a correlation, one needs a minimum amount of variation in the data. Cases that do not have any variation are lost; therefore, the number of valid cases varies across the different knowledge indices and analyses. To ensure a normal distribution of the correlational indices, we transformed those scores using Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation. For all knowledge scores, a higher score indicates more accurate knowledge.

### Analytic Strategy

Because data from two spouses are nested within couples, we used hierarchical linear modeling methods to analyze our data (Hox, 2002). This technique simultaneously examines lower-level and upper-level variance, thereby modeling each source of variance while accounting for statistical characteristics of the other level. We standardized all variables across the entire sample to enable comparison of the effects across measures and waves of the study. Because the effect of

understanding and knowledge on relationship well-being may be moderated by relationship duration (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), we included relationship length in all models to control for this factor and examine possible interactions.

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of all assessed variables at Time 1. For ease of interpretation, we provide the untransformed knowledge scores for all types of knowledge calculated as correlations. It can be seen that, overall, the correlational knowledge scores are fairly high, with the raw knowledge scores being somewhat higher than the adjusted knowledge scores, as expected. On the dichotomous scales of food preferences and positive and negative behaviors, where knowledge is calculated as the amount of hits and correct rejections, spouses detect more than half of the preferences and behaviors correctly on average. These results indicate not only that our measures of knowledge have good variation but also that people do have accurate knowledge about their partner.

To examine gender differences, we tested whether husbands and wives differed in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship well-being. We did not find any significant differences. Finally, we tested whether relationship well-being changed from Time 1 to Time 2. Contrary to our expectations about declining relationship well-being in the 1st year of marriage, adjustment and trust did not change ( $F_s < 1$  and 1.39, respectively). Intimacy decreased significantly from Time 1 to Time 2,  $F(1, 191) = 10.10, p < .01$ .

Table 2 provides the intercorrelations of all assessed types of understanding, knowledge, and relationship well-being at Time 1 and relationship well-being at Time 2. First, there is only one significant and one marginally significant correlation between the different knowledge scores within one partner. Given that the significant correlations are between the raw and adjusted scores of the same measure, which are based on the same scores and therefore most likely correlate, we conclude that knowledge on one dimension is generally unrelated to knowledge on other dimensions. Second, there are two significant and one marginally significant correlations between one partner's knowledge and the other partner's knowledge on the same dimension. These correlations could stem from the use of similar response sets of partners and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, the three indicators of relationship well-being at Time 1 and Time 2 are related but sufficiently distinct to warrant examining them separately rather than aggregating them. Because the associations between understanding and knowledge are central to this article, we discuss them in more detail later.

**TABLE 1:** Descriptive Statistics

| Variable                              | Range        | M      | SD    | N   |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------|-------|-----|
| Understanding                         |              |        |       |     |
| Self-reported understanding           | 1.83-5.00    | 4.02   | 0.47  | 394 |
| Perceived understanding               | 2.50-5.00    | 4.14   | 0.49  | 396 |
| Knowledge                             |              |        |       |     |
| Abstract knowledge                    |              |        |       |     |
| BIG-5 dimensions (raw knowledge)      | -0.45-0.97   | 0.64   | 0.21  | 390 |
| BIG-5 dimensions (adjusted knowledge) | -0.52-0.94   | 0.53   | 0.24  | 392 |
| Concrete knowledge                    |              |        |       |     |
| Food preferences                      | 3.00-12.00   | 8.93   | 1.92  | 392 |
| Relationship-relevant knowledge       |              |        |       |     |
| Forgiveness (raw knowledge)           | -1.00-1.00   | 0.39   | 0.53  | 382 |
| Forgiveness (adjusted knowledge)      | -1.00-1.00   | 0.26   | 0.69  | 336 |
| Valence of knowledge                  |              |        |       |     |
| Positive behavior                     | 3.00-8.00    | 6.68   | 1.15  | 392 |
| Negative behavior                     | 1.00-7.00    | 5.09   | 1.29  | 392 |
| Relationship well-being               |              |        |       |     |
| Adjustment (Time 1)                   | 41.00-133.00 | 110.99 | 11.26 | 396 |
| Adjustment (Time 2)                   | 27.00-135.00 | 111.14 | 10.42 | 390 |
| Intimacy (Time 1)                     | 2.33-5.00    | 4.58   | 0.47  | 396 |
| Intimacy (Time 2)                     | 3.00-5.00    | 4.51   | 0.49  | 389 |
| Trust (Time 1)                        | 2.08-5.00    | 4.22   | 0.46  | 394 |
| Trust (Time 2)                        | 2.58-5.00    | 4.20   | 0.44  | 390 |

**TABLE 2:** Intercorrelations Between All Assessed Variables at Time 1 and Correlations With Time 2 Dependent Variables

|                                 | 1     | 2                | 3                | 4     | 5                | 6     | 7                | 8                | 9    | 10               | 11                | 12    | 13               |
|---------------------------------|-------|------------------|------------------|-------|------------------|-------|------------------|------------------|------|------------------|-------------------|-------|------------------|
| Understanding                   |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 1. Self-reported                | —     |                  |                  | .06   | .10 <sup>†</sup> | -.03  | .02              | -.05             | -.01 | .01              | .29**             | .39** | .46**            |
| 2. Perceived                    | .61** | —                |                  | .03   | .08              | -.05  | .02              | -.08             | -.06 | .03              | .44**             | .39** | .51**            |
| 3. Partner reported             | .26** | .27**            | —                | .03   | .01              | .02   | .04              | -.03             | .02  | .06              | .17**             | .21** | .16**            |
| Abstract knowledge              |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 4. BIG-5 dimensions (raw)       | .03   | -.01             | .06              | .23** | -.05             | .04   | -.02             | .04              | .05  | .08              | .01               | .06   | .09 <sup>†</sup> |
| 5. BIG-5 dimensions (adjusted)  | .01   | .04              | .10 <sup>†</sup> | .04   | .04              | .00   | .07              | .03              | .06  | .00              |                   |       |                  |
| Concrete knowledge              |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 6. Food preferences             | .02   | .02              | -.03             | .06   | -.03             | .24** | .06              | .10 <sup>†</sup> | .01  | .05              | -.09 <sup>†</sup> | -.05  | .01              |
| Relationship-relevant knowledge |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 7. Forgiveness (raw)            | .04   | .10 <sup>†</sup> | .02              | -.04  | .03              | -.00  | .04              | -.04             | .04  | -.01             | .04               | .06   | .04              |
| 8. Forgiveness (adjusted)       | -.03  | .02              | -.05             | .00   | .09              | -.03  | .70**            | -.08             | -.01 | .01              | -.03              | .03   | .02              |
| Valence of knowledge            |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 9. Positive behaviors           | .02   | .02              | -.01             | -.02  | .05              | -.01  | -.02             | .00              | .02  | .02              | .03               | .05   | .04              |
| 10. Negative behaviors          | .06   | .06              | .01              | -.09  | .03              | .06   | .01              | .09              | .04  | .10 <sup>†</sup> | -.03              | .04   | .03              |
| Relationship well-being         |       |                  |                  |       |                  |       |                  |                  |      |                  |                   |       |                  |
| 11. Adjustment                  | .35** | .44**            | .11*             | .00   | -.02             | -.06  | .04              | -.02             | .05  | -.01             | .55**             | .56** | .59**            |
| 12. Intimacy                    | .39** | .49**            | .19**            | .01   | -.01             | -.03  | .04              | -.05             | .02  | .07              | .53**             | .52** | .51**            |
| 13. Trust                       | .50** | .57**            | .21**            | -.01  | .00              | -.02  | .09 <sup>†</sup> | .04              | -.03 | .07              | .47**             | .44** | .63**            |

NOTE: Correlations under the diagonal represent correlations at Time 1 within one partner. Correlations above and on the diagonal for columns 4-10 represent correlations of knowledge scores across partners. Correlations above the diagonal in columns 11-13 represent correlations with Time 2 relationship well-being scores; correlations on the diagonal in columns 11-13 represent correlations between relationship well-being at Time 1 and Time 2.

<sup>†</sup>*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

**Gender Effects**

We performed auxiliary analyses for all of the analyses described here with relationship well-being as the

dependent variable to examine possible main effects or interactions involving gender. Significant or marginal main effects or interactions with gender were observed



in 8% of the analyses (12 of 156 effects). Given that these effects were scattered and inconsistent, we dropped gender from further analyses.

### *Understanding and Knowledge*

The first aim of our article was to investigate whether and how understanding and knowledge are related. We therefore correlated the seven knowledge scores of both partners with self-reported understanding, perceived understanding, and partner-reported understanding. Table 2 shows the correlations between understanding and knowledge. Theoretically interesting are the correlations between self-reported understanding and own knowledge, and perceived understanding and partner knowledge. These correlations indicate whether perceptions of knowledge are anchored in reality, that is, whether self-reported understanding is related to knowing one's partner and whether perceived understanding is related to being known by one's partner. Overall, only 3 of the 21 correlations were marginally significant, none of which is in the theoretically most important cells. Controlling for inflation of the alpha level (i.e., Type I error) would render these effects nonsignificant (e.g., Bonferroni correction). These findings therefore suggest that understanding and knowledge are unrelated. Thus, feeling that one understands one's partner and is understood by one's partner is unrelated to actually knowing one's partner and being known by one's partner.

These findings might raise some doubt about the validity of our understanding measure. Perhaps participants do not define understanding of their partner in terms of actual knowledge about the partner. To explore this question, we calculated the correlation between the self-reported understanding score and participants' estimation of how many questions about their partner they answered in concordance with what their partner answered, a more direct measure of people's perceived knowledge about their partner. We found a significant correlation,  $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the more participants felt that they understood their partner, the more they estimated that they correctly answered questions about him or her. Consistent with the findings reported previously, we found no significant correlation between this measure and people's knowledge about their partner, further highlighting the subjective nature of understanding in close relationships.

### *Understanding and Relationship Well-Being*

The second aim of this article was to examine whether understanding is related to relationship well-being. To this end we build three multiple-predictor models including self-reported understanding, perceived understanding, partner-reported understanding, and the interaction

between perceived understanding and partner-reported understanding to predict each of the three indicators of relationship well-being.

As can be seen in Table 3, the analyses yielded significant effects of self-reported and perceived understanding for all three relationship well-being indices. We did not find any main effects for partner-reported understanding, but we found a significant interaction effect of partner-reported understanding with relationship length on adjustment,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ . To examine the nature of the interaction, we performed simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses showed that for longer relationships (simple slope at 1 *SD* above the mean relationship length), partner-reported understanding was unrelated to adjustment,  $\beta = .07$ ,  $t = 0.93$ ,  $p = .35$ . For shorter relationships (simple slope at 1 *SD* below the mean relationship length), however, partner-reported understanding was positively related to adjustment,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t = 4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . This interaction suggests that only for partners in shorter relationships, the amount of understanding reported by the partner contributes to people's own adjustment.

Comparing the residual variance of the models including understanding with the model including only relationship length as the predictor variable revealed that understanding explained 23% of the variance in adjustment scores, 28% of the variance in intimacy scores, and 26% of the variance in trust scores. Overall, these results show that understanding contributes to relationship well-being. Consistent with expectations, self-reported and perceived understanding are consistently and positively related to all indicators of relationship well-being. Thus, the more partners feel they understand their partner and the more they feel understood by their partner, the better they feel about their relationship. Contrary to our expectations, partner's understanding was not strongly related to relationship well-being.

To examine whether understanding is *predictive* of relationship well-being, we calculated residualized lagged analyses with Time 2 data. We tested the same multiple-predictor models as previously but used the Time 2 relationship well-being indices as dependent variables and added the respective Time 1 relationship well-being index as an additional predictor. These analyses are challenging because Time 1 relationship well-being is controlled for when predicting Time 2 well-being. We found that at least one component of understanding significantly predicted each of the three indices of relationship well-being 9 months later. Specifically, changes in adjustment were significantly predicted by earlier perceived understanding,  $\beta = .24$ ,  $t = 4.49$ ,  $p < .001$ . Changes in intimacy were significantly predicted by

**TABLE 3:** Understanding and Relationship Well-Being Indices at Time 1

|                                                                    | <i>Adjustment (N = 384)</i> |                |                    |                | <i>Intimacy (N = 384)</i> |                |                    |                | <i>Trust (N = 382)</i> |                |                    |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|
|                                                                    | <i>Main Effect</i>          |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                | <i>Main Effect</i>        |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                | <i>Main Effect</i>     |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                |
|                                                                    | $\beta$                     | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$                   | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$                | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> |
| Self-reported understanding                                        | .15**                       | .13            | -.07               |                | .15**                     | .15            | -.01               |                | .24**                  | .26            | .09                |                |
| Perceived understanding                                            | .32**                       | .20            | .06                |                | .38**                     | .25            | .14*               | .00            | .40**                  | .32            | -.07               |                |
| Partner-reported understanding                                     | -.02                        |                | -.10*              | .02            | .05                       |                | -.04               |                | .03                    |                | .03                |                |
| Perceived Understanding $\times$<br>Partner-Reported Understanding | .02                         |                | .09 <sup>†</sup>   | .00            | -.06                      |                | .05                |                | -.00                   |                | -.00               |                |

NOTE: Explained variances of predictors are estimated with one-predictor models.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 4:** Understanding and Time 2 Relationship Well-Being Indices at Time 2

|                                                                    | <i>Adjustment (N = 378)</i> |                |                    |                | <i>Intimacy (N = 377)</i> |                |                    |                | <i>Trust (N = 376)</i> |                |                    |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|
|                                                                    | <i>Main Effect</i>          |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                | <i>Main Effect</i>        |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                | <i>Main Effect</i>     |                | <i>Interaction</i> |                |
|                                                                    | $\beta$                     | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$                   | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$                | R <sup>2</sup> | $\beta$            | R <sup>2</sup> |
| Self-reported understanding                                        | -.03                        |                | .01                |                | .17**                     | .06            | .03                |                | .11*                   | .03            | -.03               |                |
| Perceived understanding                                            | .24**                       | .07            | .03                |                | .07                       |                | -.03               |                | .12*                   | .04            | .09 <sup>†</sup>   | .01            |
| Partner-reported understanding                                     | .08 <sup>†</sup>            | .01            | -.08               |                | .07 <sup>†</sup>          | .02            | .01                |                | -.01                   |                | -.03               |                |
| Perceived Understanding $\times$<br>Partner-Reported Understanding | .03                         |                | -.00               |                | .06                       |                | -.03               |                | -.02                   |                | .04                |                |

NOTE: Explained variances of predictors are estimated with one-predictor models.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

earlier self-reported understanding,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 3.09$ ,  $p < .01$ . Changes in trust were significantly predicted by earlier self-reported understanding and earlier perceived understanding,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $t = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ , and  $\beta = .12$ ,  $t = 2.44$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively (see Table 4 for more details). These findings suggest that understanding is predictive of, and beneficial to, relationship well-being.

Comparing the residual variance of the models including understanding with the model including only relationship length and earlier well-being as the predictor variables revealed that understanding explained 8% of the variance in adjustment scores, 8% of the variance in intimacy scores, and 6% of the variance in trust scores. Overall, these results suggest that feeling that one understands one's partner and perceiving that one's partner understands the self predicts relationship functioning 9 months later. Because the effects of self-reported and perceived understanding were not consistent across the three relationship well-being indices, some caution in interpreting these findings is warranted.

### *Knowledge and Relationship Well-Being*

The third aim of this article was to examine whether knowledge is related to relationship well-being and which moderators play a role in this link. To this end,

we calculated separate models for every knowledge index, including both people's own knowledge score and their partner's knowledge score, to investigate both actor and partner effects. Furthermore, each model included the main effect of and interaction effects with relationship duration. This resulted in seven models for each of the three measures of relationship well-being. These models allowed us to test the relation between knowledge and relationship well-being and, in a second step, by comparing the models, to investigate the moderating effect of (a) concrete versus abstract knowledge (BIG-5 dimensions vs. food preferences), (b) relationship-relevant vs. relationship-irrelevant knowledge (forgiveness vs. the other dimensions), (c) positive vs. negative knowledge (positive vs. negative behaviors), and (d) length of the relationship. We first discuss the overall picture and then turn to the role of the moderators.

As can be seen in Table 5, in general, the effects of knowledge on relationship well-being are scattered and few. There is only one marginal significant actor effect. This indicates that knowing one's partner is generally unrelated to relationship well-being. Three significant and two marginal significant partner effects emerged, however, indicating that being known by one's partner may be related to relationship well-being. The average explained variance of the significant effects was  $R^2 = 0.03$

**TABLE 5:** Knowledge and Relationship Well-Being Indicators at Time 1

|                             | Adjustment   |                   |                           |                   |              |                   | Intimacy                  |                   |              |                   |                           |                | Trust        |                   |                           |                |  |  |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|--|--|
|                             | Main Effect  |                   | Interaction With Duration |                   | Main Effect  |                   | Interaction With Duration |                   | Main Effect  |                   | Interaction With Duration |                | Main Effect  |                   | Interaction With Duration |                |  |  |
|                             | Actor Effect | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect | Actor Effect | Partner Effect    | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect |  |  |
| Abstract                    | -0.01        | 0.10 <sup>†</sup> | -0.00                     | -0.01             | 0.01         | 0.06              | 0.04                      | 0.03              | -0.04        | 0.11*             | 0.02                      | 0.03           | -0.04        | 0.11*             | 0.02                      | 0.03           |  |  |
| BIG-5 dimensions (raw)      | -0.02        | 0.14*             | 0.04                      | 0.04              | 0.01         | 0.09 <sup>†</sup> | 0.07                      | 0.09 <sup>†</sup> | 0.00         | 0.10 <sup>†</sup> | -0.05                     | -0.06          | 0.00         | 0.10 <sup>†</sup> | -0.05                     | -0.06          |  |  |
| BIG-5 dimensions (adjusted) |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                |              |                   |                           |                |  |  |
| Concrete                    | -0.01        | -0.05             | 0.01                      | -0.05             | -0.01        | -0.08             | -0.04                     | -0.06             | 0.01         | -0.03             | 0.01                      | -0.00          | 0.01         | -0.03             | 0.01                      | -0.00          |  |  |
| Food preferences            |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                |              |                   |                           |                |  |  |
| Relationship relevant       | 0.07         | 0.12*             | 0.05                      | 0.10 <sup>†</sup> | 0.06         | -0.07             | 0.04                      | 0.12*             | 0.09         | 0.05              | -0.01                     | -0.05          | 0.09         | 0.05              | -0.01                     | -0.05          |  |  |
| Forgiveness (raw)           | .00          | 0.06              | 0.06                      | 0.18*             | -0.08        | -0.02             | 0.03                      | 0.08              | 0.06         | 0.09              | -0.01                     | 0.07           | 0.06         | 0.09              | -0.01                     | 0.07           |  |  |
| Forgiveness (adjusted)      |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                |              |                   |                           |                |  |  |
| Valence                     | 0.05         | 0.04              | 0.00                      | 0.07              | 0.01         | -0.01             | 0.10 <sup>†</sup>         | 0.03              | -0.02        | -0.02             | -0.01                     | 0.04           | -0.02        | -0.02             | -0.01                     | 0.04           |  |  |
| Positive behaviors          | 0.00         | -0.03             | -0.05                     | 0.00              | 0.07         | 0.05              | -0.02                     | 0.04              | 0.06         | -0.01             | 0.02                      | -0.04          | 0.06         | -0.01             | 0.02                      | -0.04          |  |  |
| Negative behaviors          |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                   |              |                   |                           |                |              |                   |                           |                |  |  |

NOTE: Analyses are based on data from 195 couples (degrees of freedom varied across analyses because of missing data for some variables).

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ .

(range = 0-0.04). Given the number of tests performed, the results should be considered with caution and warrant replication.

Given the shortage of significant effects, the question about which factors moderate the effects becomes redundant. It seems that in our study, knowledge is not related to relationship well-being. Independent of the type of knowledge—whether it is concrete, whether it is relationship relevant, whether it concerns positive information, or whether it occurs in longer relationships—married partners are equally happy with their relationship. Similarly, as noted previously, including participant sex in the analyses did not lead to a consistent pattern of significant effects, indicating that neither wives' knowledge nor husbands' knowledge did contribute to relationship well-being.

#### *Is Knowledge Predictive of Relationship Well-Being?*

Next, we examined the effects of knowledge on relationship well-being at Time 2, controlling for relationship well-being at Time 1. As can be seen in Table 6, the analyses yielded one significant actor effect and three marginally significant partner effects, which were in the opposite direction of what we expected. Furthermore, the one significant predictor explained only 0.004% of the variance in trust scores. Overall, the findings suggest that knowledge is not, or is only weakly, predictive of relationship well-being. Thus, knowing one's partner and being known by one's partner does not seem to predict changes in one's relationship well-being.

#### *Is Understanding or Knowledge More Important for Relationship Well-Being?*

The previous analyses revealed consistent and strong effects for understanding and weak and inconsistent effects for knowledge on relationship well-being. Nevertheless, to directly test whether understanding or knowledge is more important for relationship well-being, we designed models to compare the two. For every indicator of relationship well-being we took the two strongest knowledge predictors and entered them into a model together with self-reported and perceived understanding. Specifically, for adjustment, the model included partner's adjusted knowledge on the BIG-5 dimensions and raw knowledge on forgiveness. In this model self-reported understanding,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.85$ ,  $p < .01$ ; perceived understanding,  $\beta = .30$ ,  $t = 5.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and knowledge on the BIG-5 dimensions,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $t = 2.58$ ,  $p < .05$ , emerged as significant predictors. Both aspects of understanding were stronger predictors than knowledge. For intimacy, the model included partner's adjusted

knowledge on the BIG-5 dimensions and people's own adjusted knowledge on forgiveness. Only self-reported and perceived understanding significantly predicted intimacy,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $t = 2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ , and  $\beta = .41$ ,  $t = 6.33$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively. Finally, for trust, the model included partner's raw and adjusted knowledge on the BIG-5 dimensions. Again, only self-reported and perceived understanding emerged as significant predictors of trust,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 4.85$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $\beta = .39$ ,  $t = 7.43$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively. These direct comparisons show that understanding is generally more important for relationship well-being than knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

The overarching goal of the present work was to investigate how understanding facilitates relationship well-being. In a first step we investigated whether and how understanding and knowledge are related. Furthermore, we examined whether understanding and knowledge are predictive of relationship well-being. Importantly, we examined different types of understanding and knowledge to paint a more complete picture of their role in relationship well-being. The main conclusion of the present investigation is that well-functioning relationships are characterized by feelings of understanding between partners and not necessarily by partners' actual knowledge about each other.

#### *Understanding and Knowledge*

Understanding and knowledge were, at best, sporadically related to each other, indicating that feeling understood by one's partner and feeling that one understands one's partner are not correlated with actual knowledge about the partner's traits and behaviors. A first explanation for this finding may be methodological. Our measures of understanding were fairly broad in nature, whereas our measures of knowledge focused on fairly specific traits or behavior. Also, the fact that knowledge scores on different domains were not related to each other indicates that they did not tap one underlying construct of knowledge but rather tapped diverse types of specific knowledge. The correspondence principle suggests that the link between two measures is stronger when the specificity of the two measures match (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). In line with this suggestion, only a more general construct of knowledge may show a link with our measure of general understanding. Conversely, more specific measures of understanding in different domains may show a link with our more specific measures of knowledge.

**TABLE 6:** Knowledge and Relationship Well-Being Indicators at Time 2

|                             | Adjustment   |                   |        |                           |                |        | Intimacy     |                |        |                           |                   |                   | Trust        |                |        |                           |                |        |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------|---------------------------|----------------|--------|--------------|----------------|--------|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|--------|---------------------------|----------------|--------|
|                             | Main Effect  |                   |        | Interaction With Duration |                |        | Main Effect  |                |        | Interaction With Duration |                   |                   | Main Effect  |                |        | Interaction With Duration |                |        |
|                             | Actor Effect | Partner Effect    | Effect | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect | Effect | Actor Effect | Partner Effect | Effect | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect    | Effect            | Actor Effect | Partner Effect | Effect | Actor Effect              | Partner Effect | Effect |
| Abstract                    | 0.01         | -0.02             | 0.03   | 0.06                      | 0.06           | 0.06   | 0.06         | 0.06           | -0.05  | 0.07                      | 0.01              | 0.01              | 0.10*        | 0.02           | 0.00   | 0.00                      | -0.05          |        |
| BIG-5 dimensions (raw)      | -0.07        | -0.01             | 0.02   | 0.03                      | 0.03           | 0.03   | -0.02        | 0.00           | 0.00   | -0.05                     | -0.02             | -0.02             | -0.03        | 0.06           | -0.01  | -0.01                     | -0.01          |        |
| BIG-5 dimensions (adjusted) | -0.06        | 0.04              | 0.00   | -0.07 <sup>†</sup>        | -0.01          | -0.02  | -0.01        | -0.02          | -0.03  | 0.00                      | 0.00              | 0.00              | 0.02         | 0.04           | 0.00   | 0.00                      | -0.06          |        |
| Concrete                    | 0.04         | -0.03             | -0.03  | 0.04                      | 0.06           | 0.01   | 0.06         | 0.01           | -0.01  | -0.01                     | -0.04             | -0.04             | 0.04         | 0.00           | -0.02  | -0.02                     | -0.05          |        |
| Food preferences            | -0.02        | -0.05             | -0.01  | 0.04                      | 0.06           | -0.02  | 0.06         | -0.02          | 0.02   | 0.02                      | 0.06              | 0.06              | 0.01         | -0.04          | 0.03   | 0.03                      | -0.05          |        |
| Relationship relevant       | 0.00         | -0.04             | -0.02  | 0.02                      | 0.04           | 0.02   | 0.04         | 0.02           | 0.04   | 0.04                      | 0.06              | 0.06              | 0.05         | -0.02          | 0.00   | 0.00                      | -0.02          |        |
| Forgiveness (raw)           | -0.02        | 0.08 <sup>†</sup> | 0.05   | -0.02                     | -0.01          | 0.01   | -0.01        | 0.01           | 0.06   | 0.06                      | 0.07 <sup>†</sup> | 0.07 <sup>†</sup> | 0.00         | 0.05           | -0.02  | -0.02                     | -0.02          |        |
| Forgiveness (adjusted)      |              |                   |        |                           |                |        |              |                |        |                           |                   |                   |              |                |        |                           |                |        |
| Valence                     |              |                   |        |                           |                |        |              |                |        |                           |                   |                   |              |                |        |                           |                |        |
| Positive behaviors          |              |                   |        |                           |                |        |              |                |        |                           |                   |                   |              |                |        |                           |                |        |
| Negative behaviors          |              |                   |        |                           |                |        |              |                |        |                           |                   |                   |              |                |        |                           |                |        |

NOTE: Analyses are based on data from 195 couples (degrees of freedom varied across analyses because of missing data for some variables).  
<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ .



Another explanation is more theoretically meaningful. Research on the link between the confidence people have in their knowledge of their partner and their actual knowledge revealed that people's confidence is unrelated to their knowledge (Swann & Gill, 1997). To explain this lack of a link between actual knowledge and confidence, Swann and Gill (1997) suggested that with increasing relationship duration, people become more confident in knowing their partner because their representation of their partner becomes richer. A richer representation of the other not only includes diagnostic information but also nondiagnostic information about the other. Because a richer representation, hence, does not necessarily foster actual knowledge, confidence increases (e.g., I know my partner well because I know a lot about him or her) and actual knowledge remains stable.

A parallel mechanism could apply to the (absence of a) link between understanding and knowledge. Feeling that one understands one's partner is conceptually similar to having confidence in knowing one's partner. Extending Swann and Gill's (1997) suggestions to our findings, married partners may have rich representations of each other, which may increase their feeling of understanding the partner but not necessarily the knowledge about their partner. Consistent with earlier research, then, couples in our study may have failed to realize that the richness of their representations of their partner is not indicative of their knowledge. Because we did not measure the richness of people's representations of their partners, more research is needed to investigate the link between richness of partner representation, (over)confidence, and both types of understanding.

#### *Understanding and Relationship Well-Being*

Our findings on understanding and relationship well-being are consistent with earlier findings. We found that self-reported and perceived understanding were consistently related to adjustment, intimacy, and trust. Additionally, despite the challenging character of residualized lagged analysis, we found longitudinal effects of understanding on relationship well-being. Earlier self-reported understanding predicted intimacy and trust 9 months later, and perceived understanding predicted adjustment and trust 9 months later. Thus, feeling that you understand your partner and feeling that your partner understands you is conducive to good relationships.

We did not find a main effect of partner-reported understanding on relationship well-being. We did find an interaction effect of partner-reported understanding with relationship length on adjustment at Time 1, however. Only in shorter relationships was the amount of understanding reported by the partner related to adjustment. In shorter relationships, partner understanding may help

reduce and/or buffer uncertainty about the partner. Indeed, relationship partners are highly motivated to reduce uncertainty about each other (e.g., Berger, 1988; Miell & Duck, 1986). To illustrate, a study by Miell and Duck (1986) showed that people were very uncertain about their partner's feelings for them. They seemed to be constantly concerned about the risk that the other may not like them and may therefore leave the relationship. Given this uncertainty, people try to gain information about each other. They continuously seek out information that helps them understand and interpret the other person, reduce their uncertainties, and reassure themselves that the other person likes them and cares for them (Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994). Partner understanding seems to be a perfect candidate for reducing these uncertainties in short-term relationships. In longer relationships, partners may feel less vulnerable and uncertain about the other. In this sense, partner understanding may be less diagnostic in longer than in shorter relationships.

#### *Knowledge and Relationship Well-Being*

In contrast to research on understanding, research on knowledge has struggled to find consistent evidence for its link with relationship well-being. Existing research identified four moderators that influence whether and how knowledge enhances relationship well-being. Our work is unique in integrating earlier findings by examining an as yet unexplored combination of these moderators. Our findings converged to suggest that knowledge does not, at least not consistently, contribute to relationship well-being. This effect is especially remarkable as it cannot be explained by the fact that people do not have knowledge about their partner. On nearly all of our measures of knowledge, partners had moderate scores. This knowledge, however, did not translate into greater relationship quality. People with low amounts of knowledge were as happy with their relationship as people with high amounts of knowledge. We should note, however, that our dependent variables were limited in that they focused on general positive feelings about the quality of the relationship. Knowledge should be beneficial for the relationship because it makes the partner predictable and facilitates the coordination of daily life (Swann et al., 1992). Our dependent measures did not assess this aspect of couple well-being. Consequently, it may well be that knowledge is important to relationships, just not for predicting global perceived relationship quality.

The finding that knowledge was unrelated to relationship well-being may seem surprising given the results of earlier research (Gill & Swann, 2004; Neff & Karney, 2005). A closer look at earlier studies reveals that the

type of knowledge that should contribute to relationship well-being varies across studies. Whereas researchers focusing on the concreteness of knowledge argued and found that knowledge about the partner's personality is concrete and beneficial for relationship well-being (Neff & Karney, 2005), researchers focusing on the relevance of knowledge argued and found that knowledge about the partner's personality is not relevant and therefore does not contribute to relationship well-being (Gill & Swann, 2004). Our finding that knowledge about the partner's general personality is unrelated to relationship well-being is therefore consistent with Gill and Swann's (2004) findings that nonrelevant information about the partner is unrelated to relationship well-being.

It is important to note that our study is the first to simultaneously use different methods to calculate knowledge. One could argue that knowledge measured as the correlation between ratings on personality scales is too abstract and does not reflect people's knowledge of themselves because people tend not to think about themselves in terms of 5-point scales. Our measures of food preferences and positive and negative behaviors, however, were dichotomous. Participants simply reported whether they liked a certain dish and whether they had enacted a certain behavior during the previous week. These measures are concrete and tap behavior that people likely experience in their daily life. The fact that these concrete and accessible types of daily knowledge were not related to relationship well-being further corroborates our suggestion that knowledge is not, or at least not consistently, related to relationship well-being. Still, our conclusions about the effect of knowledge are limited to these measures. There may be other measures of knowledge that are related to relationship well-being that we did not include in our study and that may be conceptually closer related to understanding (e.g., empathic accuracy; Ickes, 2003). Maybe people conceptualize understanding more in terms of the ability to know what the partner is thinking and feeling, thus, empathic accuracy. If empathic accuracy is indeed related to feelings of understanding, this would explain why this measure has a link with relationship well-being under certain circumstances (Simpson et al., 2003; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). It thus seems worthwhile to investigate how empathic accuracy relates to understanding as well as to other measures of knowledge to gain more insight into the different concepts and their effect on relationship well-being.

Our research revealed that the effect of knowledge on relationship well-being is generally weak and that even the moderators that have been suggested so far do not always do the trick. Ultimately, meta-analytical approaches may offer a solution to scrutinize the link between indicators of knowledge and relationship well-being and to

systematically identify different sources of variation of this link. Despite the necessity for further research, our results converge to suggest that knowledge is not strongly linked with global perceptions of relationship quality.

This finding is in line with research showing that people are more satisfied with their relationships the more they felt their partner had high regard for them, thus the more positive the partner's view of the self was (Murray et al., 2000). Whether the partner's view corresponded to their own self-perceptions was unrelated to their relationship satisfaction. It thus seems that people do not have a strong need for accurate perceptions of the partner; rather, they want to be perceived in a positive light.

### *Knowledge, Understanding, and Relationship Well-Being*

Our final goal was to pit the effects of understanding and knowledge on relationship well-being against each other. Our findings consistently showed that understanding is more important for relationship well-being than knowledge. The question whether perceived or actual circumstances are more influential of one's feelings and behavior has been raised by several research fields, including person perception, peer influence, and interpersonal processes (e.g., Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1995; Alley & Scully, 1994; Iannotti & Bush, 1992). Not only can the actual situation differ from people's perception of that situation, but people's perception and appraisal of the situation is often a better predictor of their behavior than the actual situation. To illustrate, research on person perception showed that men's perception of a woman's weight predicts how attractive men find the woman, but the woman's actual weight did not predict men's ratings of attractiveness (Alley & Scully, 1994). Research on peer influence demonstrated that an adolescent's perception of friends' drug use was a better predictor of the adolescent's drug use than friends' actual use (Iannotti & Bush, 1992). Research on satisfaction with counseling revealed that the perceived length of waiting time is predictive of satisfaction but not the actual waiting time (Obetz, Farber, & Rosenstein, 1997). Research on interpersonal processes found that the perception of support from a partner is a better predictor of stress reduction than actual partner support (Abbey et al., 1995; Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990).

Taken together, there is ample evidence suggesting that people's perception of a situation may be a better predictor of behavior than the actual situation. In light of these findings, knowledge in our study may reflect actual partner understanding, and understanding reflects perceived partner understanding. Consistent with findings

on the importance of subjective appraisals and perception, then, our findings show that perceived partner understanding is more diagnostic for relationship well-being than is actual partner understanding.

### Implications

Our finding that understanding and knowledge are mostly unrelated and have different effects on relationship well-being is important for theory as well as practice. Theoretically, it emphasizes the need to differentiate between two conceptualizations of understanding. Because it makes intuitive sense that understanding is based on knowledge, the two concepts often are used interchangeably. Our research highlights that understanding and knowledge can be unrelated, with different effects on relationship well-being, emphasizing the need to make a clear distinction between the two types of understanding. Furthermore, the broad claim that understanding is important for intimate relationships needs to be adjusted. Our research shows that this claim only holds for understanding. From an applied perspective, counselors who attempt to improve couple functioning should consider that it may not be sufficient to work on the actual situation a couple is in but also to pay attention to both partners' perception of the situation.

### CONCLUSION

The overarching goal of the present research was to illuminate when and why understanding contributes to relationship well-being. Our work is the first to pit two conceptualizations of understanding against each other and examine their effects on adjustment, trust, and intimacy in a prospective study among newlywed couples. Our findings paint a consistent picture of the link between relational well-being and the two types of understanding. Understanding and knowledge were independent. Understanding was related to and is predictive of relationship well-being. Knowledge was neither consistently related to nor predictive of relationship well-being. And importantly, this finding was not moderated by the type of knowledge we assessed. Thus, although understanding is at the heart of all relationships, subjectively feeling that one understands and is understood by one's partner appears to be more important to relationship well-being than actually knowing and being known by one's partner.

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