Disentangling Acceptance: Direct and Indirect Effects of Partner Acceptance on Felt Acceptance and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Acceptance in intimate relationships predicts relationship satisfaction, as well as positive treatment outcomes in some couple interventions. However, little research has attempted to disentangle the dyadic effects of husbands' and wives' partner acceptance (i.e., acceptance of one's partner) and felt acceptance (i.e., felt sense of being accepted by one's partner) on relationship satisfaction. This study utilized a modified actor-partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) to examine whether the associations between acceptance of one's partner and each partner's relationship satisfaction are mediated by each partner's felt acceptance. We analyzed baseline self-report data from 209 heterosexual married couples who participated in a brief marital intervention in the United States. The final model supported the prediction that a person's acceptance of their partner would relate to their partner's relationship satisfaction through their partner's felt acceptance (i.e., an "accuracy effect") and to their own relationship satisfaction through their own felt acceptance (i.e., a "projection effect"). In all, the study demonstrates the utility of examining partner acceptance and felt acceptance as distinct, but related, constructs. Researchers and clinicians working with couples may consider conceptualizing, assessing, and even targeting partner and felt acceptance separately.

Keywords

acceptance; felt acceptance; partner acceptance; relationship satisfaction; actor-partner interdependence mediation model

Acceptance-based interventions are gaining increasing attention as effective therapeutic modalities for both individuals and couples (Roddy et al., 2016; Vøllestad et al., 2012). In the context of intimate relationships, acceptance refers to the willingness to love a partner exactly as they are, "warts and all," and manifests as behavior that functions to maintain or pursue contact with one's partner, rather than to avoid or change them (Córdova, 2001, 2009, p. 89). Greater acceptance is related to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kappen et al.,

2018) and mediates positive treatment outcomes in some couple interventions (Hawrilenko et al., 2016; Roddy et al., 2016).

However, the inherently dyadic nature of couple interactions complicates our understanding of the impact of acceptance on relationship satisfaction. Acceptance can manifest in two directions within relationships (i.e., A accepting B and B accepting A) and each direction can be perceived from two perspectives (i.e., A's self-reported acceptance of B, or *partner acceptance*, and B's felt sense of being accepted by A, or *felt acceptance*[1]). The scientific study of acceptance has seldom distinguished among these different aspects of acceptance, although doing so may help us better understand how to support acceptance within intimate relationships. Therefore, this study tests a model (see Figure 1A) of how partner acceptance and felt acceptance relate to one another and to relationship satisfaction within heterosexual, married couples.

Most literature on the relation between acceptance and relationship satisfaction has assessed either partner or felt acceptance, but not both. Studies show that self-reported acceptance of one's partner is positively correlated with one's own relationship satisfaction (Doss & Christensen, 2006; Kappen et al., 2018; South et al., 2010) and serves as a mechanism of change for the effect of integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT) on one's own relationship satisfaction (Doss et al., 2005). This relation between acceptance of one's partner and relationship satisfaction is in line with theory on social cognition and regulation. According to the Ideal Standards Model (Campbell et al., 2001; Overall et al., 2006), perceptions of inconsistency between one's partner and one's ideal standard will lead to more negative evaluations of relationship quality. Thus, experiencing more acceptance of one's partner should diminish the gap between perceptions of one's partner and one's ideal standard, resulting in more positive evaluations of relationship quality.

Prior research also demonstrates that felt acceptance positively correlates with one's own relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2003; Lehane et al., 2018), and increases in self-reported felt acceptance partially mediate the positive effects of a brief marital intervention on one's own relationship satisfaction (Hawrilenko, 2016). Perception of partner's regulation attempts, a closely related construct, has also been associated with lower relationship quality, even when controlling for partner's self-report of regulation attempts (Overall et al., 2006). Feeling accepted by one's partner may increase relationship satisfaction by promoting one's perception of authenticity and intimate safety in a romantic relationship, both of which are associated with better relationship satisfaction (Córdova, 2014; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Swann et al., 1994).

Perhaps obviously, an individual's self-reported acceptance of their partner is likely linked with their partner's felt acceptance. Studies consistently demonstrate that people are at least somewhat accurate at interpreting their partners' inner states and behaviors. For example,

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[1]Note that authors have been inconsistent in their use of terms to describe these constructs. For example, what we refer to as *partner acceptance* has been elsewhere termed *acceptance of partner* (Córdova et al., 2014), *relationship acceptance* (Doss & Christensen, 2006), and *partner acceptance* (Kappen et al., 2018). What we refer to as *felt acceptance* has been elsewhere termed *perceived acceptance* (Kappen et al., 2018), *intimate partner acceptance* (Rohner, 2005), *acceptance* (Cramer, 2003), and *felt acceptance* (Córdova et al., 2014).

self-reported responsiveness to the needs of a partner predicts partners' perception of being responded to (Lemay & Clark, 2008), and self-reported partner regulation is positively correlated with partners' perception of these regulation attempts (Overall et al., 2006). This has been referred to as the "accuracy effect" or "kernel of truth" (Lemay et al., 2007). The accuracy effect likely characterizes acceptance, given that acceptance is enacted through behaviors functioning to sustain or increase contact, which should be observable by others (Córdova, 2001).

Only one study, to our knowledge, has attempted to connect these relations into a model of how partner and felt acceptance relate to each other and to relationship satisfaction within couples. Kappen and colleagues (2018) hypothesized that acceptance of one's partner would relate to the partner's relationship satisfaction through the partner's felt acceptance. Unexpectedly, their results showed a significant direct effect of acceptance of one's partner on the partner's felt acceptance, but no direct effect of the partner's felt acceptance on the partner's relationship satisfaction, and therefore no mediation effect. However, their sample size (N=53) was small for an examination of indirect effects; their study included only one person's data for each measure of acceptance (i.e., A's partner acceptance and B's felt acceptance, but not B's partner acceptance or A's felt acceptance), and thus did not model the interdependency in partners' reports of acceptance; and their findings have yet to be replicated. Therefore, a more robust examination of the potential indirect effect of acceptance of one's partner on the partner's relationship satisfaction through the partner's felt acceptance is warranted.

Furthermore, although people's perceptions of their partners do somewhat accurately track their partners' inner states and behaviors, a significant discrepancy is also common (Bolger et al., 2000; Lemay et al., 2007; Overall et al., 2006) and other factors (e.g., "perceived contingencies of spousal acceptance"; Murray et al., 2006) may influence perceptions. For example, research on the projection of responsiveness suggests that one's perception of a partner's responsiveness is predicted more strongly by one's own self-reported responsiveness to one's partner than by the partner's self-reported responsiveness to the self (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Applied to acceptance, this "projection effect" suggests that when an individual feels more accepting of their partner, they may project that acceptance onto their partner such that they perceive greater acceptance from their partner, and will report greater relationship satisfaction.

Drawing on several theories from couple research, the present study examined how partner acceptance and felt acceptance relate to one another and to relationship satisfaction. It was hypothesized (see Figure 1A) that acceptance of one's partner and felt acceptance would both have direct effects on one's own relationship satisfaction, replicating previous findings. This study aimed to extend previous research by testing whether a person feels accepted by their partner and satisfied with their relationship both when they accurately perceive their partner's acceptance of them and when they themselves are accepting of their partner. Therefore, it was also hypothesized that acceptance of one's partner would relate to the partner's relationship satisfaction through the partner's felt acceptance ("accuracy effect"), and that acceptance of one's partner would relate to one's own relationship satisfaction through one's own felt acceptance ("projection effect"). Given that acceptance promotion

is the primary intervention in IBCT (Roddy et al., 2016), the hypothesized accuracy and projection effects are important because they represent distinct pathways through which acceptance of one's partner may relate to both partners' relationship satisfaction. The accuracy effect was initially tested, but not demonstrated, by Kappen and colleagues (2018); the present study aimed to provide a more robust test of the accuracy effect using a larger sample size and all measures for both partners. The projection effect has not yet been tested with respect to relational acceptance.

Method

This study utilized baseline data from a longitudinal investigation of a brief marital health intervention (Córdova et al., 2014), which was completed in compliance with Clark University's Institutional Review Board. Participants completed baseline self-report questionnaires by mail. Additional details about the procedure can be found in Córdova et al. (2014).

Participants

The sample included 209 heterosexual, cohabitating married couples. Six same-sex couples were excluded from the analysis to allow for testing of distinguishability of paths based on gender. Participants' mean age was 45.6 ($SD = 11.5$, range from 20 to 78). The sample was predominantly White (92.6%), with 2.6% identifying as Black or African American, 2.6% as Asian, and 0.7% as American Indian or Alaska Native; and highly educated, with 43.5% reporting a graduate degree, 23.2% a bachelor's degree, 20.1% some college, and 12.4% a high school diploma or less. Couples had been married for an average of 15.2 years ($SD = 12.0$). Most had at least one child (79.8%). Using standard cut-off scores for clinically significant relationship distress (Funk & Rogge, 2007), 26% of couples had at least one distressed spouse.

Measures

Relational Acceptance—Each spouse completed the 26-item self-report Relational Acceptance Questionnaire (RAQ; Wachs & Córdova, 2007). Half of the items on the RAQ measure felt acceptance, with sample items such as "I feel like my partner accepts me as a person, 'warts and all,'" whereas the other half measure partner acceptance, with sample items such as "I have a hard time getting over the times when my partner's behavior disappoints me." Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" and, after reverse-coding negatively worded items, averaged. Higher scores indicate greater acceptance. Four subscale scores were obtained: wife's felt acceptance, husband's felt acceptance, wife's partner acceptance, and husband's partner acceptance; Cronbach's αs ranged from .86 to .94.

A previous study using the present sample demonstrated via a confirmatory factor analysis that the hypothesized two-factor solution—of felt acceptance and partner acceptance—fit the data well; that study also used longitudinal data to demonstrate that early changes in felt acceptance predicted later changes in relationship satisfaction, over and above early changes in relationship satisfaction, suggesting that acceptance is distinct from relationship

satisfaction (Hawrilenko et al., 2016). Furthermore, factor correlations between partner acceptance, felt acceptance, and relationship satisfaction were all below the established .85 cut-off (Shaffer et al., 2015) for empirically distinct constructs.

Relationship Satisfaction—Spouses independently rated their relationship satisfaction with the six-item Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). The first five items (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is strong") were scored on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 representing "very strongly disagree" and 7 representing "very strongly agree." A final global assessment item ("We have a good relationship") was scored on 10-point Likert scale from "very unhappy" to "perfectly happy." All items were positively worded; total scores ranged from 6 to 45. High levels of reliability were found for husbands (Cronbach's α = .96) and wives (Cronbach's α = .97).

Results

Table 1 presents the unstandardized descriptive statistics and covariance matrix for all study variables, as well as paired *t*-tests examining gender differences. No participants were missing entire measures. Missing data included: one missing partner acceptance item for seven individuals (1.7%), one missing felt acceptance item for eight individuals (1.9%), and one missing relationship satisfaction item for three individuals (0.7%). Participant mean substitution on the item level was used to handle the small amount of missing data (Parent, 2013). Analyses were also replicated using listwise deletion, which provided the same pattern of results (see Table S1 and Figure S1).

Data were analyzed using an actor-partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011), which is based on the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny 2005). The APIM is a dyadic analysis which allows for estimation of both actor effects, or relations among variables within a member of a dyad, and partner effects, or relations among variables between members of a dyad. The APIMeM extends the APIM by adding mediation paths. We used structural equation modeling in the R (Version 3.6.2; R Core Team, 2019) package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) to first estimate the saturated standard APIMeM. We then estimated our theorized modified APIMeM, shown in Figure 1A. We evaluated model fit using a variety of fit indices with standard cut-offs (Kline, 2016): a non-significant chi-square statistic, a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than or equal to .95, a root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than or equal to .08, and a standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) less than or equal to .08. This theoretical model demonstrated poor fit, $\chi^2(4, N = 209) = 28.95$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .17, 90% confidence interval (CI [.12, .23]), CFI = .96, SRMR = .08. Based on a review of the path estimates for the saturated model, modification indices, and theoretical considerations, we respecified the theoretical model by removing constraints from the paths from felt acceptance to the partner's relationship satisfaction, effectively adding the paths back into the model. These paths could be justified based on research indicating that feeling accepted predicts personal well-being (Lac & Luk, 2019). Individuals with greater well-being may be more likely to enact behavior that would improve partner satisfaction. The resultant model demonstrated good fit, $\chi^2(2, N = 209) = 4.01$, $p = .135$, RMSEA = .07, 90% confidence interval (CI [.00, .17]), CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .02.

Next, we simplified the model based on indistinguishability of corresponding husband and wife paths, following procedures described by Ledermann et al. (2011). A model including some equality constraints[2] demonstrated good fit, $\chi^2(5, N = 209) = 6.74$, $p = .241$, RMSEA $= .04$, 90% confidence interval (CI [.00, .11]), CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .02; and did not fit the data significantly worse than the unconstrained model, $\chi^2(3) = 2.73$, $p = .44$. Therefore, we retained this more parsimonious model as our final model; see Figure 1B for standardized path estimates.

In this model, consistent with hypotheses, acceptance of one's partner was positively related to both partners' felt sense of being accepted and to one's own relationship satisfaction, but not to the partner's relationship satisfaction. Contrary to our hypotheses, feeling accepted by one's partner was positively related both to one's own relationship satisfaction and to the partner's relationship satisfaction. All indirect effects (reported in Table 2) were statistically significant, as indicated by confidence intervals (CIs) that do not include zero; specific to our hypotheses, significant indirect effects were found from acceptance of one's partner to one's own relationship satisfaction through one's own felt acceptance and from acceptance of one's partner to the partner's relationship satisfaction through the partner's felt acceptance. CIs were calculated with bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Standardized effects were obtained by standardizing variables prior to the analysis using the mean and standard deviation calculated across both spouses (Ledermann et al., 2011).

Discussion

A main premise of acceptance-based couple interventions is that fostering acceptance can, in certain contexts, improve relationship outcomes. In this study, we aimed to unpack the association between acceptance and relationship satisfaction by testing the prediction that an individual's acceptance of their partner would be positively associated with their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction through their own and their partner's felt acceptance. The final model demonstrated good fit, lending support for the hypothesized paths.

As predicted, acceptance of one's partner and one's own felt acceptance were each positively associated with one's own relationship satisfaction, replicating established findings in the literature (Cramer, 2003; Kappen et al., 2018; Lehane et al., 2018; South et al., 2010). This study builds on past research by helping us answer the question: when do people feel accepted by their partners? The obvious answer is: when their partners feel accepting toward them. The present study provides preliminary evidence for this "accuracy effect," such that the association between acceptance of one's partner and the partner's relationship satisfaction is partially mediated by the partner's felt acceptance. The accuracy effect fits with the intuitive assumption that when one person feels more accepting toward their partner, they will behave in a way that communicates greater acceptance, which will be perceived and felt by the partner, thereby relating to greater relationship satisfaction.

[2]Sequential chi-square difference tests indicated that equality constraints could be placed on the husband and wife paths from partner acceptance to the partner's felt acceptance, from felt acceptance to one's own relationship satisfaction, and from felt acceptance to the partner's relationship satisfaction, without significantly worsening model fit; but not on the husband and wife paths from partner acceptance to one's own felt acceptance or from partner acceptance to one's own relationship satisfaction.

Perhaps less intuitively, the findings also support the prediction that the association between acceptance of one's partner and one's own relationship satisfaction is partially mediated by one's own felt acceptance. In other words, people also feel accepted by their partners when they themselves feel accepting toward their partners. This "projection effect" is consistent with literature on social projection, or the attribution of one's own characteristics to others, which has been demonstrated with other relationship constructs, such as responsiveness (Allport, 1924; Lemay et al., 2007). Although it is less intuitive, the projection effect appears to be comparable in magnitude to the accuracy effect.

An unexpected finding was that felt acceptance related directly to the partners' relationship satisfaction. One interpretation is that the improved affect and greater sense of well-being associated with feeling accepted by a partner (Lac & Luk, 2019) may lead to increased positivity and prorelationship behavior (e.g., Carlson et al., 1988), which could positively impact a partner's relationship satisfaction. Alternatively, the sense of intimate safety and authenticity that emerges from feeling accepted by one's partner may itself be experienced positively by the partner. Perceiving partners as authentic has been related to trust, commitment, and relationship satisfaction (Wickham, 2013). People want to feel that they know their partners truly.

Differentiating between partner acceptance and felt acceptance is important because the two constructs may be uniquely targeted by different therapy interventions. For example, the uncovering understandable reasons intervention from IBCT helps couples discuss the reasonable (and empathy-inducing) contexts that underly their differences (Jacobson & Christensen, 1998). This process can change the stimulus function of differences, making them less aversive and ultimately promoting greater acceptance of one's partner (Córdova, 2001). On the other hand, the speaker-listener technique (Stanley et al., 1997) allows each member of the couple to experience their partner hearing, and ideally validating, their perspective, which can promote a deeper sense of felt acceptance. Furthermore, the multiple paths from one person's acceptance of their partner to both partners' relationship satisfaction highlight how acceptance may be targeted clinically from several vantage points for any given couple. For example, if a person endorses low relationship satisfaction, yet interventions aiming to increase their acceptance of their partner have been unsuccessful, the therapist may next consider targeting the partner's acceptance of the person or even directly targeting the person's own felt acceptance. We are not aware of literature exploring whether specific techniques for promoting acceptance target (or emphasize) partner acceptance versus felt acceptance, so this may be a direction for future research.

The present study's strengths include the measurement of partner and felt acceptance for both partners in each dyad, the sample size, and the use of a sophisticated modeling technique to test a model of acceptance as a mutual and interactive process. This study extends previous research by providing preliminary evidence that felt acceptance mediates the association between partner acceptance and relationship satisfaction, both within and between partners. The study's limitations include its use of cross-sectional data; therefore, the associations are not necessarily causal. Further research may consider extending the model with longitudinal or experimental designs that would clarify temporal associations among constructs. Second, our study used self-report measures for all constructs. Given the

high correlation between self-reported partner acceptance and relationship satisfaction in this study, future researchers might consider employing observational measurement of partner acceptance (Córdova, 2001) to reduce the risk of common method bias. And finally, the generalizability of our sample is significantly limited by the relative homogeneity of sample characteristics. As such, the novel findings described here merit future study and replication with more representative samples.

The present study found support for a model of how partner acceptance relates to relationship satisfaction through felt acceptance within heterosexual marriages in the US. The variety of pathways to relationship satisfaction reveals the complexity of the construct of acceptance and the importance of examining both partners' felt and partner acceptance in a given relationship. It is our hope that this study will stimulate further inquiry into the nuances of how acceptance unfolds as a dynamic process in intimate partnerships.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

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A. Theoretical Model
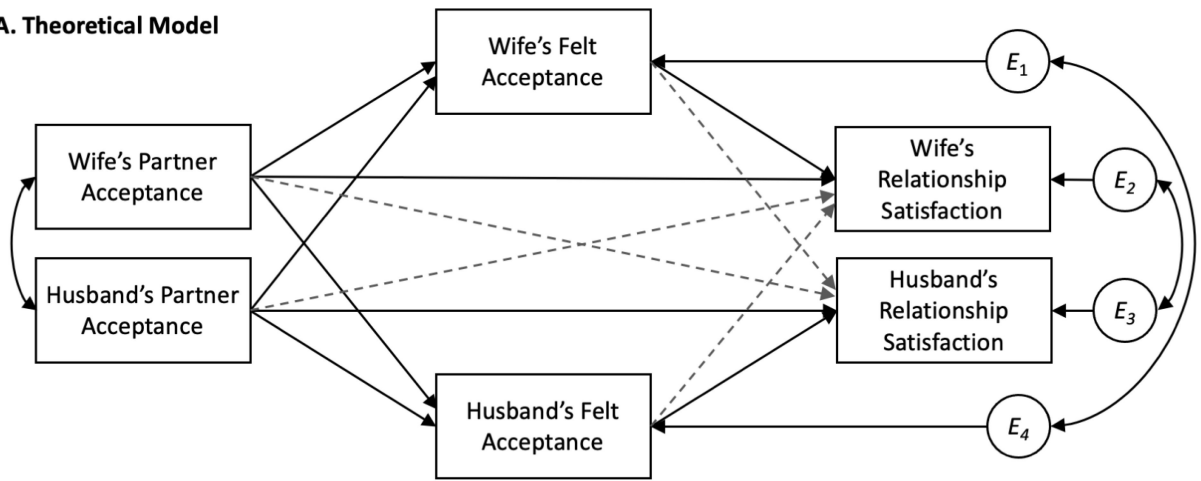
B. Final Model
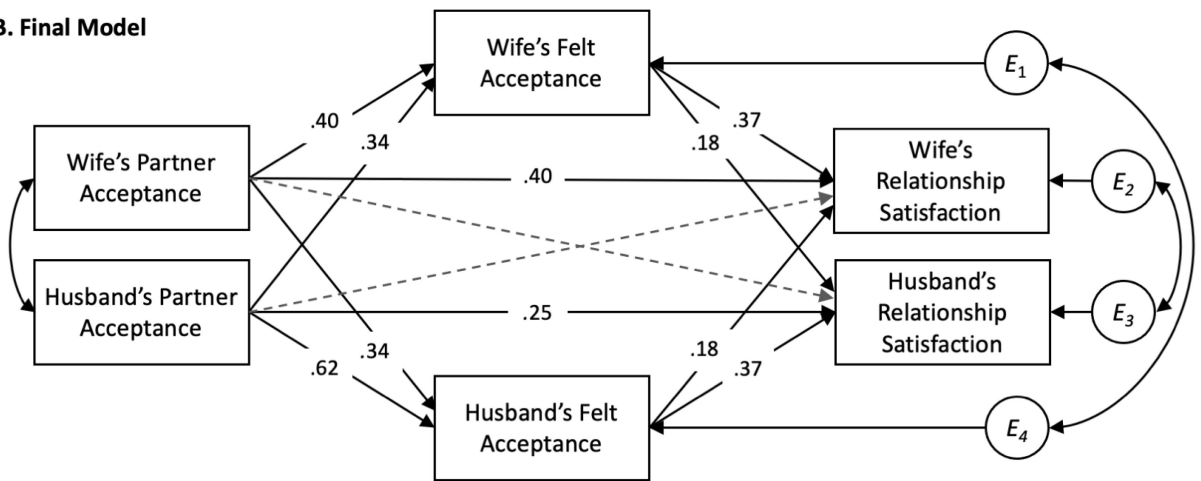
Figure 1. Theoretical and Final Models Relating Husbands' and Wives' Partner Acceptance, Felt Acceptance, and Relationship Satisfaction

Note. Dotted lines represent paths that have been constrained to be zero.

Table 1

Unstandardized Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and T-Tests for All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Wife's Partner Acceptance	—					
2. Husband's Partner Acceptance	.47[*]	—				
3. Wife's Felt Acceptance	.59[*]	.51[*]	—			
4. Husband's Felt Acceptance	.60[*]	.68[*]	.44[*]	—		
5. Wife's Relationship Satisfaction	.73[*]	.52[*]	.65[*]	.54[*]	—	
6. Husband's Relationship Satisfaction	.50[*]	.61[*]	.51[*]	.65[*]	.62[*]	—
M	3.58	3.93	4.09	3.93	35.75	36.58
SD	0.80	0.67	0.79	0.88	8.70	8.01
$t(df = 208)$	−6.64[*]		2.68[*]		−1.66	
Cohen's d	0.47		0.19		0.10	

[*]
$p < .001$.

Table 2

Indirect Effects and Total Effects of Partner Acceptance on Relation Satisfaction Through Felt Acceptance

Effect	Path	Estimate	95% CI	% Total Effect
Wife's actor effect				
Total effect		0.610	0.509, 0.707	
Total IE		0.209	0.143, 0.278	34.3
Actor-actor IE [a]	$PA_W \rightarrow FA_W \rightarrow RS_W$	0.148	0.098, 0.206	24.3
Partner-Partner IE	$PA_W \rightarrow FA_H \rightarrow RS_W$	0.061	0.032, 0.094	10.0
Husband's actor effect				
Total effect		0.542	0.408, 0.665	
Total IE		0.292	0.215, 0.369	53.9
Actor-actor IE [a]	$PA_H \rightarrow FA_H \rightarrow RS_H$	0.231	0.169, 0.295	42.6
Partner-Partner IE	$PA_H \rightarrow FA_W \rightarrow RS_H$	0.061	0.032, 0.094	11.3
Wife's partner effect				
Total effect		0.237	0.164, 0.314	
Total IE		0.237	0.164, 0.314	100.0
Actor-partner IE	$PA_H \rightarrow FA_H \rightarrow RS_W$	0.112	0.061, 0.168	47.3
Partner-actor IE [b]	$PA_H \rightarrow FA_W \rightarrow RS_W$	0.125	0.082, 0.175	52.7
Husband's partner effect				
Total effect		0.197	0.135, 0.261	
Total IE		0.197	0.135, 0.261	100.0
Actor-partner IE	$PA_W \rightarrow FA_W \rightarrow RS_H$	0.072	0.037, 0.112	36.5
Partner-actor IE [b]	$PA_W \rightarrow FA_H \rightarrow RS_H$	0.125	0.082, 0.175	63.5

Note. IE = indirect effect; CI = confidence interval; PA = partner acceptance, or acceptance of one's partner; FA = felt acceptance; RS = relationship satisfaction, W = wife's, H = husband's.

[a] "projection effect."

[b] "accuracy effect."