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Accuracy and bias in perceptions of conflict style among same-sex and heterosexual couples ☆

Robert E. Wickham [a,*], Charlotte L. Beard [a], Ellen D.B. Riggle [b], Esther D. Rothblum [c], Sharon S. Rostosky [b], Kimberly F. Balsam [a]

[a] Palo Alto University, United States
[b] University of Kentucky, United States
[c] San Diego State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Intimates form stable impressions of their romantic partner's conflict style, which may influence interactions during conflicts and shape expectancies regarding future disagreements. Despite a large body of work comparing relationship outcomes among heterosexual and same-sex couples, research has yet to examine how the validity of these perceptions vary as a function of gender and sexual orientation. The present study examines perceptual accuracy and bias in perceptions of conflict style among same-sex female (N_{dyads} = 215), same-sex male (N_{dyads} = 113), and heterosexual (N_{dyads} = 93) couples. Although members of same-sex and heterosexual couples exhibited some similarity in accuracy and bias in perceptions, a number of compelling differences suggest that the gender and the sexual orientation of a couple shape perceptions of partner conflict style.

1. Introduction

Conflict resolution styles play a critical role in shaping relationship maintenance behaviors and ultimately relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 2014). The manner in which each partner engages in resolving conflicts has been shown to be a stronger predictor of relationship outcomes than type or the overall frequency of conflict (Noller & Feeney, 1998) and has been linked to both physical and psychological well-being (Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003). Longitudinal studies incorporating behavioral observation techniques have identified distinct behavioral response patterns (e.g., demand-withdraw) that are strongly associated with relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution over the first decade of marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Heavy, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Moreover, a compelling body of work has emerged examining how individuals' *perceptions* of the conflict styles used by their romantic partner are associated with relationship satisfaction and dissolution (Kurdek, 1994, 1995).

More generally, the perception of partner traits and behaviors is a core area of interest within relationship science, and a number of research programs have focused on the content of these perceptions and their association with relationship outcomes (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Wickham, 2013; Wickham, Reed, & Williamson, 2015). Since the early 2000s a notable portion of this research has focused on the validity of partner perceptions. Systematic reviews of this literature grounded in theoretical (Gange & Lydon, 2004), empirical (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010), and methodological (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; West & Kenny, 2011) perspectives provide convergent evidence that partner perceptions are based on both truth (accuracy) and bias. The meta-analysis conducted by Fletcher and Kerr (2010) found significant differences in the degree of perceptual bias exhibited by male and female partners, suggesting that the processes and motives that underlie partner perceptions depend in part on gender role socialization. However, all of the studies included in Fletcher and Kerr's (2010) analysis involved heterosexual dyads, and as a result the observed differences may be attributed to the gender of the perceiver, the gender of the

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* Corresponding author at: Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, Palo Alto University, 1791 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto, CA 94304, United States.
E-mail address: rwickham@paloaltou.edu (R.E. Wickham).

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target, or the unique combination of both partners' gender role orientations (West, Popp, & Kenny, 2008). Thus, the stronger mean-positivity bias for women in Fletcher and Kerr (2010) analysis may arise because the perceiver is female, or because female perceivers were evaluating male targets. Alternatively, this perceptual bias might be a consequence of the interaction of having a female perceiver and a male target. The only way to test the relative influence of both members' gender in shaping accuracy and bias of partner perceptions is to compare partner perceptions in heterosexual dyads to partner perceptions in male and female same-sex dyads (West et al., 2008).

Several studies have explored similarities and differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples in relationship processes and outcomes (see Rothblum, 2008 for a review). However, differences in the perceptual accuracy and bias of interpersonal perceptions in close relationships (conflict or otherwise) across same-sex and heterosexual couples has yet to be examined in published research. The present study addresses this critical gap in the literature by combining advances in analytic methods for examining the validity of interpersonal perceptions (West & Kenny, 2011) with procedures designed to disentangle the role of gender and sexual orientation (West et al., 2008) in order to compare levels of accuracy and bias of conflict resolution strategies among same-sex male, same-sex female, and heterosexual couples.

1.1. Conflict in close relationships

The management of interpersonal conflict in intimate relationships plays an important role in shaping relationship outcomes (Gottman, 2014), as well as overall physical and psychological well-being (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003). Considerable evidence has emerged in support of the argument that the manner in which partners manage conflict is a more important predictor of relationship outcomes than the absolute frequency of conflict (Noller & Feeney, 1998; Prado & Markman, 1999; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). The present study focuses on four distinct conflict resolution strategies identified by prior observational and self-report studies. *Positive problem solving* strategies are characterized by compromise and negotiation in resolving conflicts. Partners may also approach relationship discourse in a more confrontational manner through the use of *conflict engagement* behaviors, which are typically exemplified by hostility and aggression in the content and tone of verbal exchanges during disagreements. *Withdrawal* behaviors are less confrontational but constitute the most destructive approach to conflict and are characterized by one partner "tuning out" or ignoring the other in order to avoid conflict (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Kurdek, 1994). Finally, *compliance* behaviors occur when one partner abandons his or her position or point of contention in order to acquiesce and discontinue an argument, often leaving the initial source of conflict unresolved.

A person's construal of his or her partner's conflict style may be just as important of a predictor of relationship functioning as the actual frequency with which their partner engages in a given conflict style. Indeed, a number of studies provide evidence that a perceiver's idiosyncratic construal of his or her partner's supportiveness (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Gable et al., 2003; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 2001), or an individual's perception that their partner is responsive to his or her most fundamental needs (Reis, 2007; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), may be more strongly related to relationship outcomes than the partner's actual response. Multiple studies comprised of same-sex, heterosexual, married, and unmarried couples confirm that intimates form impressions of their romantic partner's conflict style that remain stable over the course of the relationship (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). Other research suggests that the perceptions that individuals form about their partner's conflict resolution style may influence the course of conflicts and shape expectancies regarding future disagreements (Kurdek, 1994, 1995, 1998; Prado & Markman, 1999; Stanley et al., 2002). However, the process of impression formation is inferential and subject to inaccuracies, which means that partners' perceptions of one another are often characterized by both truth (accuracy) and bias.

1.2. Truth and Bias in partner perceptions

The Truth and Bias (T&B) model described by West and Kenny (2011) provides a theoretical and methodological framework for examining the basis of partner perceptions in dyadic relationships. According to this framework, interpersonal judgments are driven by three distinct, but inter-related factors. *Accuracy* in partner perceptions, also known as the "truth force" in the formal T&B model, refers to the strength of the relationship between a person's perception of their partner's attributes and the partner's actual self-reported standing on the attribute. In contrast, the *bias of assumed similarity*, termed the "bias force" in the T&B, reflects the extent to which a person's own standing on the attribute of interest influences their perception of the partner's attributes. Finally, the degree to which perceivers consistently over- or under-estimates the level of the attribute in question, relative to their partner's self-report, is known as *directional bias*.

Fig. 1 illustrates the primary components of the T&B statistical model for a hypothetical couple, comprised of persons A and B. In this model, one person's perception of their partner's conflict resolution style (e.g., A's Perception of B) is regressed on his or her own self-reported standing on the attribute (e.g., A's Self Rating), as well as his or her partner's self-reported standing on the attribute (e.g., B's Self Rating). The coefficient linking a person's self rating to his or her perception represents the bias of assumed similarity ($\gamma_{Similarity\ Bias\ A}$), whereas the coefficient linking the person's partner's self rating to his or her perception represents accuracy ($\gamma_{Accuracy\ A}$). Finally, if all variables have been properly centered, the regression intercept represents directional bias (e.g., $\nu_{Direct.\ Bias\ A}$).

Past research has focused solely on heterosexual dyads when examining gender as a moderator of perceptual accuracy and bias. This was accomplished by allowing the magnitude of the similarity bias, accuracy, and directional bias coefficients to differ for male and female partners. However, these prior studies are limited by the fact that male perceivers rated only female targets, and female perceivers rated only male targets, which introduces uncertainty regarding the underlying cause of any observed gender differences in the magnitude of accuracy or bias coefficients. For example, a stronger accuracy coefficient for female perceivers may arise because they are better attuned to their partner's behavior, but it may also be the case that male partners are easier to judge. Fully disentangling the effects of perceiver and target gender requires dyads in which male perceivers rate male targets, as well as dyads in which female perceivers rate female targets. In order to accomplish this, the basic T&B framework must be adapted to accommodate both heterosexual and same-sex (female and male) couples. The technical aspects of analysis are provided in subsequent sections, but from a conceptual standpoint, this amounts to estimating separate $\gamma_{Similarity\ Bias}$, $\gamma_{Accuracy}$, and $\nu_{Direct.\ Bias}$ coefficients for same-sex female, heterosexual female, heterosexual male, and same-sex male participants. Moreover, the model should be specified in such a way that allows one to determine whether the differences in the magnitude of coefficients across these participant types are driven by the gender of the perceiver, the gender of the target, or the specific combination of perceiver and target gender (i.e., sexual orientation).