



## Implicit agency, communality, and perceptual congruence in couples: Implications for relationship health



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We use implicit measures to examine gender traits and relationship health.
- Couples with perceptual congruence of gender traits report healthier relationships.
- Understanding benefited both traditional and non-traditional gender traits in couples.
- Viewing themselves both as more communal had similar benefits to perceptual congruence.
- Costs were only incurred when partners both viewed themselves as more agentic.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 January 2014

Revised 14 June 2014

Available online 11 July 2014

#### Keywords:

Close relationship

Interpersonal perception

Implicit Association Test

Gender trait

Relationship satisfaction

### ABSTRACT

Men and women are expected to exemplify the gendered traits of agency (masculinity) and communality (femininity). Research has yet to examine how the implicit adoption of these traits influences close relationships. To address these gaps, the current study used the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in a dyadic context to examine whether or not these implicit traits, and perceptual congruence (i.e., seeing one's partner as they see themselves) regarding these traits, relate to relationship health in mixed-sex couples. Results revealed that when both partners implicitly viewed themselves as the more agentic partner, relationship health suffered. Having one or both partners identify as more communal resulted in greater relationship health. Results were equally positive regardless of whether couples implicitly viewed their relationship traditionally (i.e., perceiving the male as the more agentic partner and the female as the more communal partner) or non-traditionally (i.e., perceiving the female as more agentic, and the male as more communal). Implications for interpersonal relationships are discussed.

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### Introduction

According to social role theory, men and women are socialized to occupy stereotypical roles that are defined by agentic (e.g., assertive and powerful) and communal (e.g., warm and caring) traits and behaviors (Eagly, 1987; Jost & Kay, 2005). These stereotypical beliefs are endorsed both implicitly and explicitly (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 2001; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Of importance, these traits are not merely descriptive; they also operate as rules, prescribing men to display agentic, and women to display communal behaviors (Rudman et al., 2012). In line with these beliefs, lay theories often contend that traditional mixed-sex couples who adhere to these stereotypes (i.e. with an agentic male and a communal female) experience better relationship outcomes despite

accumulating evidence to the contrary (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012).

Though society may pressure men and women to conform to stereotypical traits, research demonstrates that it is the traits that matter, not who possesses them. Specifically, research finds that communal traits relate to positive relationship behaviors. For example, explicit communality predicts positive problem-solving (Burger & Jacobson, 1979), routine relationship maintenance (Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000), and general relationship satisfaction (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Lamke, Sollie, Durbin, & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). This connection between explicit communal traits and relationship satisfaction has been found for both men and women (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). On the other hand, an explicit agentic self-concept is not related to any of the above behaviors (Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Burger & Jacobson, 1979; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Lamke et al., 1994; Stafford et al., 2000),

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and has been shown instead to be negatively related to general relationship satisfaction (Ickes, 1993; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

However, agentic traits may not be uniformly detrimental for relationships. We propose that previous research has overlooked two critical factors that may distort the apparent importance of partner's communality. Specifically, previous work has failed to utilize implicit measures of gendered traits, relying instead solely on self-reports which may be distorted by social desirability concerns (see below). Moreover, it has only investigated participants' perceptions of their own or their partner's agentic and communal traits, and overlooked the critical interplay of individuals' beliefs about their own and their partner's traits. That is, previous research failed to examine *perceptual congruence* (i.e., seeing one's partner as they see themselves). To address this gap, the present research investigated the relationship between communal and agentic traits (both explicit and implicit), partner's perceptual congruence about these implicit traits, and relationship health.

### Implicit perspectives

Implicit measures, including the Implicit Association Test (IAT), are growing in popularity in relationship research (Baldwin, Lydon, McClure, & Etchison, 2010). Evidence from close relationship research demonstrates that individuals are often unable, or unwilling, to accurately self-report attitudes and beliefs about their partner, making implicit measures an important addition to explicit measures in investigating close relationships (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009; LeBel & Campbell, 2013; Lee, Rogge, & Reis, 2010; McNulty, Olson, Meltzer, & Shaffer, 2013; Zayas & Shoda, 2005). In a meta-analysis of the relationship between explicit and implicit measures, close relationships' implicit and explicit measures had lower correlations than those of any other study category analyzed, including racial attitudes (Greenwald et al., 2009). Implicit partner attitudes have also been shown to be better predictors of relationship satisfaction (LeBel & Campbell, 2013; McNulty et al., 2013; Scinta & Gable, 2007) and relationship dissolution (Lee et al., 2010), relative to explicit attitudes. However, to our knowledge, the existing research on agentic and communal traits has solely utilized explicit measures.

There is further reason to believe that implicit measures may provide unique information in the context of reporting the gendered traits of agency and communality in relationships. For example, people are aware of backlash (i.e., social and economic penalties; Rudman, 1998) for violating gender norms (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman et al., 2012). The desire to avoid backlash may inhibit self-reporting of opposite-gendered traits. Furthermore, individuals may not be fully conscious of these traits in the context of a relationship, and thus may be unable to accurately report them. The use of the IAT to measure agency and communality should circumvent potential unwillingness and inability to accurately report on these traits, as well as provide additional predictive information above and beyond explicit measures.

The IAT may also provide a window into the implicit shared reality of romantic partners. The IAT can measure a relative view of oneself within the context of a romantic relationship, which may differ significantly from views of the self in general. For example, Julie may not think of herself as an especially agentic person, but in the context of her relationship, she may think she is more agentic than her partner, Dan. The relative nature of the IAT also allows for investigating perceptual congruence of oneself and one's partner in the context of a romantic relationship.

### Perceptual congruence in close relationships

Agreement between perceptions of a partner and the partner's perception of him or herself (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Acitelli,

Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Iafate, Bertoni, Margola, Cigoli, & Acitelli, 2012; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009) is known as perceptual congruence. For example, if Julie believes she is more agentic than Dan, and Dan also believes Julie to be more agentic than him, this couple is considered to have perceptual congruence about their relative agency. Perceptual congruence across a range of domains positively relates to relationship outcomes (Acitelli et al., 1993, 2001; Iafate et al., 2012; Levinger & Breedlove, 1966; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009; Weger, 2005), but this concept has not been applied to the gendered traits of agency and communality in the context of a relationship, nor has it been examined implicitly.

Due to the continued importance placed on adhering to stereotypical gender traits (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005, 2008; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), perceptual congruence regarding communality and agency may play an important role in relationship satisfaction. For example, perceptual congruence may help reconcile the disconnect between lay theories contending that traditional mixed-sex couples (i.e. with an agentic male and a communal female) experience better relationship outcomes (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012), and research indicating that communality (traits associated with femininity) alone predicts positive relationship health (Ickes, 1993). That is, the negative influence of agentic traits may be mitigated by perceptual congruence regarding these traits (i.e. couples who agree on who is agentic and communal in their relationship may not experience poor relationship health).

### The current study

In the present study, we used explicit and implicit measures from both members of a couple to determine (1) whether implicit identification with agency and communality in the context of a relationship relates to relationship health above and beyond the influence of explicit identification with these traits; (2) if perceptual congruence regarding implicit agentic and communal traits relates to relationship health; and (3) whether traditional partners (i.e., those who perceive the male as the more agentic partner and the female as the more communal partner) or non-traditional partners (i.e., those who perceive the female as the more agentic partner and the male as the more communal partner) fare differently with respect to relationship health. Specifically, we hypothesize that implicit agentic and communal traits will relate to relationship health. In keeping with research on the positive aspects of explicit perceptual congruence, individuals who show general perceptual congruence about their implicit relative traits (i.e. agree on who is more agentic and communal in their relationship) will have higher relationship satisfaction than those who disagree. Finally, following research on the negative aspects of agency in close relationships (Ickes, 1993), we hypothesize that individuals in a couple who both indicate that they are more agentic than their partner will have lower relationship satisfaction than those who have perceptual congruence, who see both individuals in the couple as equally agentic and communal, or who have two communal members.

### Methods

#### Participants and procedure

One-hundred seventy-nine mixed-sex couples (358 people over the age of 18) who had been in a relationship for at least three months were recruited via campus and neighborhood advertisements for a "Couple Study," and earned \$50 for participation. Due to a computer malfunction, implicit measures were not recorded for nine couples, a further eight couples were removed from analysis due to error rates on the IAT, leaving one hundred sixty-two mixed-sex couples (324 people). These couples had been dating an average of 21.79 months ( $SD = 18.07$ ), and their mean age was 20.39 ( $SD = 3.08$ ). One couple was married, 12% lived together, and 2% had children. Participants were

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