Empathy and relationship satisfaction in heterosexual couples: 
Actor-partner interdependence analyses

Duncan Cramer and Sophia Jowett, Loughborough University, UK

Abstract
This paper examines the following research questions in the romantic heterosexual relationships of 65 professional athletes and their partners. To what extent is received empathy (i.e. feeling understood) in both women and men related to the accurate perception (i.e. accurate empathy), assumed similarity and actual similarity of the relationship? To what degree is relationship satisfaction in both women and men related to received empathy, accurate perception, assumed similarity and actual similarity of the relationship? To what extent does conflict in the relationship mediate the association between empathy and relationship satisfaction? Is there evidence to support Cutrona’s model that both conflict and depression partially mediate the relation between empathy and relationship satisfaction? These questions will be addressed with actor-partner interdependence analyses where possible using structural equation modelling controlling for measurement error.

Introduction
Knowledge of the factors affecting how satisfied we are with our romantic or marital-type relationships may help us to have more satisfactory relationships. This paper looks at the potential role that empathy may play in determining satisfaction with heterosexual relationships. One of the strongest correlates of relationship satisfaction is emotional support (e.g. Cramer, 2006; Cutrona, 1996). A key characteristic of emotional support is likely to be the extent to which we perceive that our feelings and ‘experiencing’ are understood by a significant other person (e.g. Cramer, 1986; Rogers, 1959). Person-centred theory (Meador & Rogers, 1979), formerly called client-centred theory (Rogers, 1959), proposes that the perception of feeling understood or being given empathy is one of three interrelated characteristics which lead to more fulfilling relationships. According to this theory feeling understood helps us to become more aware of all of our feelings thereby enabling us to develop our potential. Feeling understood by one’s partner has been found in young adults to be strongly related to feeling satisfied with one’s romantic relationship (Cramer, 2003).

Empathy or the extent that we are aware of how someone views themselves or their world has been measured as the absolute difference between a person’s view of some aspect of their lives and someone else’s perception of how they think that person sees that aspect (e.g. Dymond, 1954; Acitelli, Douvan & Veroff, 1993). This measure of empathy has also been found to be related to relationship satisfaction in married couples. To distinguish it from the feeling of being understood we shall refer to it as empathic accuracy, accurate empathy or accurate understanding. High empathic accuracy will occur if couples assume the other person is like them and if couples report their views in a similar way (e.g. Cronbach, 1955). Consequently, it is important to control for the actual similarity within couples when measuring empathic accuracy. When this has been done, empathic accuracy has still been generally found to be related to relationship satisfaction. For example, Acitelli et al. (1993) reported that wives’ but not husbands’ marital well-being was positively related to both wives’ and husbands’ understanding of destructive conflict behaviours. Sillars, Weisberg, Burggraf and Zietlow (1990) noted that marital satisfaction was only significantly related in wives and that was only to the husbands’ understanding of instrumental aspects of the relationship such as money and leisure. The idea that accuracy of interpersonal perception is important for effective relationship functioning is found in
other theoretical perspectives such as role theory (e.g. Luckey, 1960) and symbolic interactionism (e.g. Taylor, 1967).

More recently, empathic accuracy has been measured by video-recording an interaction between two people, asking them separately to select points at which they recalled experiencing an unexpressed thought or feeling and to describe what these were and then showing the video to the other person and asking them what they thought the other person was thinking or feeling at these points (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette & Garcia, 1990). The similarity between these two reports is rated by judges and is adjusted with a measure of chance agreement. This ‘on-line’ or interaction-derived measure of empathic accuracy has been found to be related to relationship satisfaction in couples who are dating (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003) or married (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette & Rusbult, 2002).

Feeling understood may also be measured as the absolute difference between a person’s view of some aspect of their lives and how they think that someone else perceives their view of that aspect. (Laing, Phillipson & Lee, 1966). For example, a husband may think that he is fat and he may think that his wife thinks he is fat, in which case it may be presumed that he feels understood. There only seems to be one published study using this approach and this found that 12 married couples who sought marital help felt less understood on this measure than 10 couples assumed to be happily married (Laing et al., 1966). The difference between these two groups in feeling understood appears to be slightly smaller than that for accurate empathy. The relation between accurate empathy and feeling understood was not reported. As the size of the association with relationship satisfaction for a direct measure of feeling understood (Cramer, 2003) has been found to be greater than that for accurate empathy (e.g. Acitelli et al., 1993; Sillars et al., 1990), it would seem that feeling understood is likely to be a stronger correlate of relationship satisfaction than accurate empathy. The association between feeling understood and accurate empathy does not appear to have been studied. However, it would be expected that being accurately understood would lead to a feeling of being understood.

The link of relationship satisfaction to empathy (Cramer, 2003) and a questionnaire-derived measure of accurate empathy (e.g. Acitelli et al., 1993; Sillars et al., 1990) has previously only been examined in women and men separately and not together as a couple in a dyadic analysis (e.g. Kenny, 1996; Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2006). A dyadic analysis of couple data is important for at least two reasons. One reason is that some of the characteristics of the two members of a couple are likely to be similar or related. This lack of independence can bias tests of significance in either the Type I or Type II direction (Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny & Judd, 1986). Another reason is that the behaviour of one person is likely to affect the behaviour of the other person and that it is important to determine the extent to which this occurs (e.g. Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The actor-partner interdependence model assesses the extent to which one person’s score on an independent variable (e.g. empathy) may affect not only that person’s score on a dependent variable (e.g. relationship satisfaction; an actor effect) but also that person’s partner’s score on that dependent variable (a partner effect; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). Using this model Kilpatrick et al. (2002) found no significant partner effect for an interaction-derived measure of empathic accuracy and relationship satisfaction in married couples at three yearly intervals within the first four years of marriage.

References


