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# Ideal Standards, the Self, and Flexibility of Ideals in Close Relationships

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*Two studies tested how romantic ideal standards and their flexibility are associated with relationship quality. In Study 1, individuals rated themselves and their ideal romantic partners on three dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources. They then reported how flexible their ideals were on each dimension and how closely their current partner matched their ideal standards. Individuals who rated themselves higher on each dimension held higher ideal standards that were less flexible and perceived higher relationship quality the more their partners matched their ideals. This latter effect was moderated by the flexibility of ideals on two dimensions—warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources. In Study 2, members of dating couples reported their ideals, how closely their partners matched their ideals, and their flexibility. People were happier the more they matched their partners' ideals. Partner discrepancy ratings once again mediated the link between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension.*

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**H**ow do people evaluate their intimate relationships? What criteria do they use to make these judgments? Recent research testing the newly developed Ideal Standards Model (see Fletcher & Simpson, in press; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, in press) has documented that individuals who think their current partner/relationship more closely matches their ideal partner/relationship on different dimensions tend to be more satisfied with their relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). One goal of the present research was to test whether the flexibility of ideal standards (i.e., the degree to which individuals are willing to consider partners/relationships that fall below their ideals) moderates the relationship between ideal standards and rela-

tionship judgments. A second goal was to assess the relationship between self-perceived attributes (i.e., one's own standing on relationship dimensions) and judgments of relationship quality and to determine what factors mediate this link.

## *The Structure, Content, and Roles of Ideal Standards*

The Ideal Standards Model describes the structure, content, and roles that ideal standards serve in romantic relationships (for full accounts, see Fletcher & Simpson, in press; Simpson et al., in press). The model contends that ideal standards operate as chronically accessible knowledge structures that contain three interrelated components: images of the self, the ideal partner, and the ideal relationship. Using an inductive approach, Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) developed and validated a set of scales that measure ideal standards in close relationships. Partner ideals were found to center on three major dimensions (warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources), and relationship ideals consisted of two dimensions (intimacy/loyalty and passion).

According to the model, comparisons between these ideal standards and perceptions of the current partner or relationship should serve three basic roles. The mag-

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nitude of the discrepancies between ideal standards and perceptions of the current partner/relationship (hereafter referred to as partner discrepancies) allows individuals to (a) estimate and evaluate the quality of their partners and relationships (e.g., to assess the appropriateness of potential or current partners/relationships), (b) explain what happens in relationships (e.g., give causal accounts explaining relationship satisfaction, problems, or conflicts), and (c) regulate and make adjustments in relationships (e.g., predict and possibly control current partners/relationships). The model proposes that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of partner discrepancies should depend on which of two basic motivational goals are dominant or salient at a given point in time: the need for relationship enhancement (or idealization) or the need to seek the truth and strive for accuracy. In situations that encourage idealization (e.g., when individuals are highly invested in and committed to their current partners/relationships), people should be motivated to decrease partner discrepancies by changing their ideal standards, their perceptions of the current partner/relationship, or perhaps both (see Simpson et al., in press). In contrast, conditions that demand high levels of accuracy (e.g., when individuals must decide whether to increase commitment, when they meet attractive alternative partners, or when serious relationship problems occur) should motivate people to accept discrepancies at face value.

Although portions of the model remain speculative, empirical support has been provided for some of its key postulates. For example, the central prediction that individuals' evaluations of their relationships should be influenced by the size of partner discrepancies has been supported in both cross-sectional research (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) and in longitudinal research (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999). The recent study by Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas (1999), which tracked the development of newly formed dating relationships, also revealed that ideals and perceptions of the current partner/relationship tend to be relatively stable over time and that partner discrepancies appear to influence relationship quality judgments over time, but not vice-versa.

#### *Flexibility Beliefs and Ideal Standards*

Although people set ideal standards, they are likely to be flexible regarding their ideals. One way of understanding flexibility beliefs is in terms of Social Judgment Theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Ideal standards can be viewed as similar to attitude anchors; the closer perceptions of the current partner match relevant anchors, the more satisfied a person should be with his or her partner and relationship. Flexibility beliefs reflect the amount of discrepancy a person is willing to accept between current

perceptions and their ideal standards (i.e., their latitudes of acceptance and rejection for the partner and relationship). If a person is less flexible, his or her latitude of acceptance should be narrow and the latitude of rejection should be wide, making chronically large discrepancies between partner perceptions and ideals intolerable. Conversely, the latitude of acceptance should widen when flexibility increases, rendering larger discrepancies between partner perceptions and ideals more tolerable.

Although not examining the flexibility of ideal standards per se, some research has found that individuals display differential flexibility in different relationship contexts. For example, Kenrick, Groth, Trost, and Sadalla (1993) and Regan (1998a, 1998b) have found that men and women tend to adopt more flexible relationship standards when evaluating potential partners for short-term relationships than for more serious ones. Even though men show more flexibility than do women when contemplating short-term sexual relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), both genders want romantic partners to match their ideal standards as closely as possible in long-term relationships. Individuals, then, seem to adjust their flexibility in different contexts, but not their ideal standards. Because this research asked individuals to consider hypothetical relationships when making their judgments, it does not address how flexibility beliefs might affect perceptions of the partner and relationship in established relationships.

To illustrate the possible significance of ideal flexibility, consider two hypothetical relationships in which two individuals think that their partners fall equally short of their ideal standards, but one person has more flexible standards. The person who is more flexible should be more likely to maintain positive perceptions of his or her partner and relationship over time given his or her greater tolerance, whereas the less flexible person should not be as accepting of his or her partner's shortcomings. Thus, assessing the flexibility of ideals should allow for more precise and specific predictions of perceived relationship quality.

#### *Self-Perceptions, Ideal Standards, and Flexibility*

According to Baldwin (1992) and Bowlby (1982), models of the self and models of others are intricately related. Thus, if people have positive self-views, they tend to have positive views of others. Extending this link, past research has shown that individuals' self-perceptions are tied to images of an ideal partner (Hester, 1996; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996) as well as to their willingness to compromise these standards (Regan, 1998a, 1998b). The Ideal Standards Model posits that links between self-perceptions, ideal standards, and flexibility beliefs should operate along the specific ideal dimensions dis-

covered by Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) rather than in a global manner. For instance, an individual who perceives himself or herself as very warm, communicative, and trustworthy should set very high ideals on this dimension and expect potential partners and relationships to come close to his or her ideal (i.e., he or she should display low flexibility). Conversely, if the same person perceives himself or herself as physically unattractive, this person should have lower partner ideals on this dimension and adopt a more flexible attitude concerning the extent to which his or her ideal has been met. In light of this evidence, self-perceptions should be related to the variability found in individuals' ideals.

Two central predictions can be derived from this theorizing. First, individuals who have more positive self-perceptions and higher ideal standards should display less flexibility regarding those specific ideals. Second, flexibility beliefs should moderate relations between partner discrepancies and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, people with higher flexibility should be more satisfied with their relationships when faced with larger partner discrepancies. On the other hand, people with lower flexibility should be less satisfied.

#### *The Self, Partner Discrepancies, and Relationship Satisfaction*

Previous work has shown that self-assessments, ideals, and relationship satisfaction, when measured in a global fashion, all tend to be positively correlated (Kenrick et al., 1993; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996). However, the links among self-assessments, partner discrepancies, and relationship satisfaction might operate differently, depending on the specific dimensions that people use to evaluate potential partners and relationships (Simpson et al., in press). Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) found that individuals who hold higher ideals on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension report higher levels of relationship satisfaction. However, correlations between ratings of the vitality/attractiveness and status/resources ideal categories and relationship satisfaction were low and nonsignificant. We suspect there are two reasons for this. First, intimacy-related ideals and perceptions in relationships tend to be the most central and important factors that people use to rate their partners in long-term relationships (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Second, vitality/attractiveness and status/resources represent dimensions that tend to be more firmly grounded in physical reality and, therefore, may be inherently less ambiguous than are the (often more subjective) judgments of warmth/trustworthiness. As a result, individuals may perceive their partners' level of warmth/trustworthiness as being more open to change and con-

trol than is true of their partners' appearance or socioeconomic status.

We also postulated a specific mediation model to explain the link between self-perceptions and ratings of relationship satisfaction. People with very positive self-perceptions on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension should be highly motivated to (a) create a partner and a relationship that is warm and trustworthy and (b) idealize their partner/relationship by decreasing partner discrepancies on this dimension, especially in situations that promote the enhancing/idealization motive. Both processes should result in more positive self-perceptions on a given dimension, leading to smaller partner discrepancies on that dimension, which, in turn, should be associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this example and our previous rationale, we predicted that such a pattern would emerge more strongly for the warmth/trustworthiness ideal partner dimension than for the other two dimensions. However, we also expected that such a mediation model should apply if any ideal dimension was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction.

#### OVERVIEW AND STUDY 1

The above predictions were tested in two studies with samples of people involved in heterosexual dating relationships. In each study, individuals' ratings on the three partner ideal standards, the flexibility of each ideal, each partner discrepancy, self-perceptions on the items contained in each ideal dimension, and perceived relationship quality were assessed. Both studies used the three partner ideal scales developed by Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999): warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources. Study 1 assessed a sample of individuals involved in dating relationships, whereas Study 2 assessed a sample of dating couples, enabling us to investigate dyadic effects that could not be tested in the first study.

In Study 1, a pattern of significant and positive correlations was predicted to emerge between (a) self-ratings (on each ideal dimension), (b) ideal ratings on each dimension, and (c) beliefs about the need for a close fit between perceptions of the current partner and ideal standards. In particular, we predicted that positive self-perceptions would be related to both higher ideal standards and less flexibility. In addition, people should report less flexibility when they have higher ideal standards.

Second, replicating Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999), we predicted that greater relationship satisfaction would be associated with perceptions of a closer fit between ideals and perceptions of the current partner. Third, we predicted that ideal flexibility would moderate the relation between partner discrepancies and

**TABLE 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities of the Ideal Scales and Relationship Quality Index: Study 1**

	M		t	Reliability	
	Men	Women		Men	Women
Warmth/trustworthiness					
Self-ratings	5.57 (0.75)	5.86 (0.57)	3.27****	.90	.86
Ideal ratings	6.01 (0.64)	6.23 (0.49)	2.87***	.92	.88
Partner discrepancies	5.91 (0.86)	5.94 (0.90)	0.32	.94	.94
Flexibility ratings	6.98 (1.27)	7.37 (1.16)	2.43**	.95	.95
Status/resources					
Self-ratings	4.86 (0.92)	4.68 (0.77)	-1.61	.88	.86
Ideal ratings	4.09 (1.09)	4.59 (0.94)	3.78****	.88	.77
Partner discrepancies	5.81 (0.92)	5.67 (0.97)	-1.09	.91	.92
Flexibility ratings	5.23 (1.72)	6.06 (1.68)	3.73****	.92	.92
Vitality/attractiveness					
Self-ratings	5.43 (0.76)	5.33 (0.70)	-1.03	.72	.66
Ideal ratings	5.49 (0.73)	5.45 (0.55)	-0.40	.76	.71
Partner discrepancies	5.81 (0.79)	5.90 (0.89)	0.85	.79	.77
Flexibility ratings	6.52 (1.22)	6.64 (1.21)	0.82	.83	.86
Relationship quality	-0.28 (2.72)	0.20 (2.77)	1.35	.95	.95

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Degrees of freedom for the independent sample *t* tests were 237.

\*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\*\**p* < .001.

relationship satisfaction. More precisely, greater flexibility of ideals should buffer relationship satisfaction when discrepancies are large. In contrast, individuals with less flexible ideals should be less satisfied when discrepancies are large. Fourth, we predicted that partner discrepancies would mediate the link between self-ratings and relationship satisfaction, especially for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. Finally, although gender differences were not the focus of the research, we tested for gender differences in both studies.

## METHOD

### Participants

Study 1 included 239 introductory psychology students at Texas A&M University (119 women and 120 men). Participants received partial course credit for their participation. All participants were required to have been dating someone for at least 3 months. The mean length of relationships was 17.51 months (*SD* = 13.22 months). The average age of participants was 19.52 (*SD* = 1.61) and 18.50 (*SD* = .84) years for men and women, respectively.

### Procedure

Between 10 and 20 participants reported to an experimental room. The experimenter explained that the study was about the self, current dating partners, and

current relationship perceptions and that they would answer a number of questionnaires regarding these perceptions. Participants were then seated apart from each other and given a packet that included the questionnaires, an informed consent form, and instructions. Each participant was asked to read and sign the informed consent form and to carefully read the instructions prior to answering the questions. Each packet contained an identification number, and participants were told not to put their name on any materials. The questionnaires were embedded and intermixed within a larger set of questionnaires. When participants had completed the questionnaires, they sealed their packet and were then thanked and debriefed.

### Materials

*Ideal scales.* Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles's (1999) three ideal partner scales were used to assess participants' conceptions of their ideal partner. Participants rated the degree to which several individual and interpersonal traits accurately described their ideal partner on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The scales contain three dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness (20 items; e.g., understanding, kind, warm), vitality/attractiveness (16 items; e.g., outgoing, active lifestyle, sexy), and status/resources (7 items; e.g., successful, financially secure, dresses well). All items within each dimension were then averaged, with higher scores representing more positive images of ideal

partners. Means and internal consistencies for these (and all other) scales are displayed in Table 1.

*Self-ratings.* Participants rated themselves, compared with others of the same gender, on the same attributes contained in the ideals scales on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *I score much lower on this attribute*, 7 = *I score much higher on this attribute*). All items within each dimension were then averaged, with higher scores indicating more positive self-images relative to others of the same gender.

*Partner discrepancies.* Participants compared their current partner relative to their ideal partner on the same attributes (i.e., how much does the current partner match a given attribute of the ideal partner).<sup>1</sup> Responses were made on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *does not match my ideal at all*, 7 = *completely matches my ideal*). Within each dimension, all items were averaged. High scores indicated that the current dating partner closely matched the respondent's ideal on a given dimension, and low scores indicated that the match was poor.

*Ideal flexibility.* The items on the Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) scales were then used to assess how flexible each participant was with respect to dating a person who did not match his or her ideal partner on that attribute. Specifically, participants were asked to "think about your ideal partner once again. Think about the extent to which a romantic partner (e.g., a person you might want to date) would have to match your ideal partner in order for you to have a successful and happy relationship with the potential romantic partner." Participants responded on 10-point Likert-type scales (0 = *0% to 10% of my ideal partner*, 9 = *91% to 100% of my ideal partner*). Scores were averaged within each dimension, with higher scores reflecting more rigid standards (i.e., less flexibility).

*Relationship quality.* Three measures were used to assess the general quality of participants' relationships: Hendrick, Hendrick, and Adler's (1988) Satisfaction Scale, Rubin's (1970) Love Scale, and Lund's (1985) Commitment Scale. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .86 to .92 for men and women on these three measures. All three measures were highly correlated (for both men and women,  $r$ s ranged from .74 to .79). Moreover, principal-axis factor analyses conducted separately on men and women indicated that all three measures loaded highly on one factor. Therefore, the scale scores were standardized (using  $z$ -score transformations) and then aggregated, with higher scores representing more positive perceived relationship quality. This index was labeled "relationship quality."

To control for general perceptions of the partner and relationship, participants also completed scales assessing their CL and CLalt (Simpson, 1987). These

scales were included to determine whether the predicted effects (particularly those involving partner discrepancies) would remain reliable after controlling for these global perceptions. If partner discrepancies are an independent construct, they should be independent predictors.

## RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for all scales are reported in Table 1. The internal consistencies of each scale were acceptable for both genders, ranging between .66 and .95. Using independent-groups  $t$  tests, five gender differences emerged. Women rated themselves higher on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension than did men. Women also envisioned their ideal partner as being more warm and trustworthy than did men, and they reported being less flexible on this dimension than men. In addition, women desired an ideal partner who had more status and resources than the ideal partner endorsed by men, and they reported being less flexible with respect to this dimension than men.

### *Self, Ideals, and Flexibility*

The correlations between self-ratings, ideal standards, and perceived relationship quality are presented in Table 2. Tests of independent correlations indicated no significant gender differences in the correlations; therefore, the correlations are calculated across the entire sample. The results were consistent with predictions. First, for each dimension, more positive self-ratings were associated with significantly higher ideal ratings ( $M r = .44$ ). Second, higher self-ratings on each dimension were associated with significantly less flexibility ( $M r = .42$ ). Third, higher ideal standards were associated with significantly reduced flexibility regarding those ideals ( $M r = .48$ ).

### *Flexibility as a Moderating Variable*

To test whether partner discrepancies predicted perceived relationship quality, and to test whether flexibility of ideal standards moderated this relationship, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed separately for each of the ideal dimensions. In each analysis, the dependent variable was perceived relationship quality. All predictor variables were standardized prior to the analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). The predictor variables in all analyses were partner discrepancies, ideal flexibility, and gender (coded as 0 for women and 1 for men). Each possible two-way interaction as well as the three-way interaction also were entered as predictors. There were no effects for gender in any of the analyses; therefore, gender is not discussed further.

**TABLE 2: Zero-Order Correlations Between the Ideals Scales and Relationship Quality: Study 1**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Warmth/trustworthiness													
1. Self-ratings	—												
2. Ideal ratings	.57***	—											
3. Flexibility ratings	.48***	.44***	—										
4. Partner discrepancies	.41***	.31***	.37***	—									
Status/resources													
5. Self-ratings	.32***	.17***	.21***	.25***	—								
6. Ideal ratings	.14**	.23***	.13**	.06	.28***	—							
7. Flexibility ratings	.19***	.17***	.48***	.16**	.32***	.61***	—						
8. Partner discrepancies	.24***	.22***	.32***	.63***	.32***	.08	.24***	—					
Vitality/attractiveness													
9. Self-ratings	.47***	.23***	.26***	.23***	.45***	.05	.12	.09	—				
10. Ideal ratings	.33***	.59***	.23***	.16**	.24***	.34***	.19***	.05	.43***	—			
11. Flexibility ratings	.39***	.21***	.72***	.30***	.26***	.19***	.59***	.20***	.44***	.40***	—		
12. Partner discrepancies	.44***	.27***	.32***	.79***	.24***	.10	.17***	.65***	.24***	.23***	.34***	—	
13. Relationship quality	.28***	.21***	.23***	.68***	.15**	-.05	.08	.49***	.09	-.04	.14**	.52***	—

NOTE: Correlations are calculated across the entire sample.

\*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Displayed in Table 3 are the regression coefficients for the analyses on each dimension. For each dimension, a significant main effect of partner discrepancy emerged, indicating that perceived relationship quality scores were higher when smaller discrepancies were perceived and lower when larger discrepancies were perceived. There was also a marginally significant effect of flexibility for the vitality/attractiveness dimension, revealing that people with more stringent (i.e., less flexible) standards reported lower perceived relationship quality. The interaction between partner discrepancies and flexibility (which tests the moderating hypothesis) was marginally significant for the status/resource dimension and significant for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. The pattern of the interaction was very similar for both dimensions; therefore, only the interaction for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension is presented in Figure 1. As predicted, people reported higher perceived relationship quality when they had smaller partner discrepancies, especially when they were less flexible. Larger partner discrepancies were related to lower perceived relationship quality, especially when people were less flexible.

#### *Alternate Explanations*

Given the positive correlations between ideal standards and the flexibility of ideals (see Table 2), it might be argued that the absolute level of ideal standards, and not their flexibility per se, is responsible for the main effects and interactions reported above. Similar arguments could be made for the self-ratings, given their large correlations with both flexibility and ideals. Therefore, both ideals and self-ratings were entered as covariates in the above analyses to determine whether

(a) the main effects of partner discrepancies would remain and (b) flexibility of ideal ratings would uniquely moderate the association between perceived partner discrepancies and perceived relationship quality. For both the status/resources and the warmth/trustworthiness dimensions, controlling for ideal and self-ratings did not alter the significance or the strength of the interactions reported above. Furthermore, the main effect of partner discrepancies remained significant in these analyses and also for the vitality/attractiveness dimension. In addition, this pattern of results remained when the interaction between ideal standards and partner discrepancies was controlled.

It is also possible that the partner discrepancy measure is confounded with global perceptions of partners and relationships. If so, the results that emerged would not be uniquely related to partner discrepancies per se. Thus, we also conducted the above analyses controlling for participants' self-reported CL and CLalt. None of the reported effects significantly changed when these scales were controlled.

#### *Partner Discrepancies as a Mediating Variable*

To test our prediction that partner discrepancies should mediate the relation between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality, a number of conditions must be met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Self-perceptions need to be significantly correlated with perceived relationship quality. This condition is met for both the warmth/trustworthiness and the status/resources dimensions but not for the vitality/attractiveness dimension (see Table 2). Self-perceptions also must be significantly correlated with partner discrepancies (i.e., the mediator), and partner discrepancies must predict

**TABLE 3: Unstandardized Regression Coefficients of Ideals and Flexibility on the Relationship Quality Index: Study 1**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Semipartial correlation (squared)</i>
<i>Vitality/attractiveness</i>			
Partner discrepancies	1.89	7.25****	.42 (.18)
Flexibility	-0.49	-1.92*	.14 (.02)
Interaction	0.05	<1.0	.03 (.001)
<i>Status/resources</i>			
Partner discrepancies	1.59	6.01****	.35 (.12)
Flexibility	-0.21	<1.0	.10 (.01)
Interaction	0.48	1.85*	.10 (.01)
<i>Warmth/trustworthiness</i>			
Partner discrepancies	2.19	10.46****	.50 (.25)
Flexibility	-0.20	<1.0	.10 (.01)
Interaction	0.57	3.38***	.17 (.03)

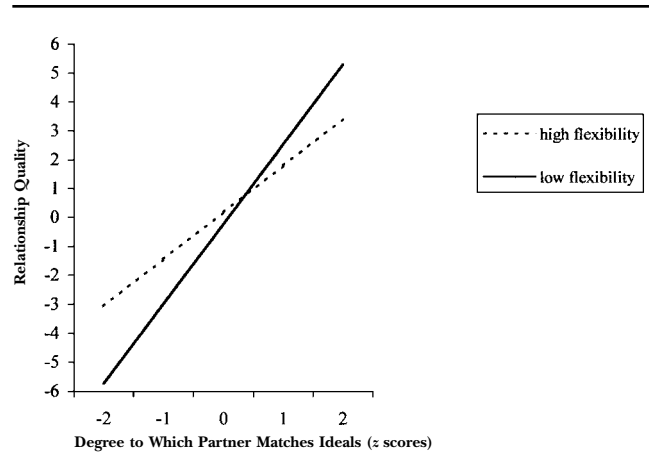
\* $p < .10$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

perceived relationship quality, controlling for self-perceptions. Figure 2 illustrates the mediation model tested for the warmth/trustworthiness and the status/resources dimensions. As can be seen, all of the conditions for mediation were present, and the coefficient from self-perceptions to perceived relationship quality dropped to zero when partner discrepancies were entered into the equation. According to Sobel's test for determining the significance of a product path (see Baron & Kenny, 1986), both indirect effects of self-perceptions on perceived relationship quality were significant,  $z = 6.18$ ,  $p < .01$ , for warmth/trustworthiness, and  $z = 4.41$ ,  $p < .01$ , for status/resources, respectively. Thus, as predicted, partner discrepancies fully mediated the relation between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality on these two ideal dimensions.

## DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 largely confirmed our predictions. First, we found a set of positive correlations within each ideal dimension between self-perceptions, the level of ideal standards, and the extent to which ideals were flexible. Second, the flexibility of individuals' ideals moderated the relation between partner discrepancies and perceived relationship quality for two of the three dimensions (status/resources and warmth/trustworthiness). Third, partner discrepancies fully mediated the link between self-perceptions and ratings of relationship quality for these two ideal dimensions.

These results replicate previous findings that smaller partner discrepancies predict more positive perceived relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). However, they also indicate that flexibility of ideals is an important moderating variable. Specifically, people with more flexible ideals were more sat-



**Figure 1** Interaction of partner discrepancies and ideal flexibility on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension: Study 1.

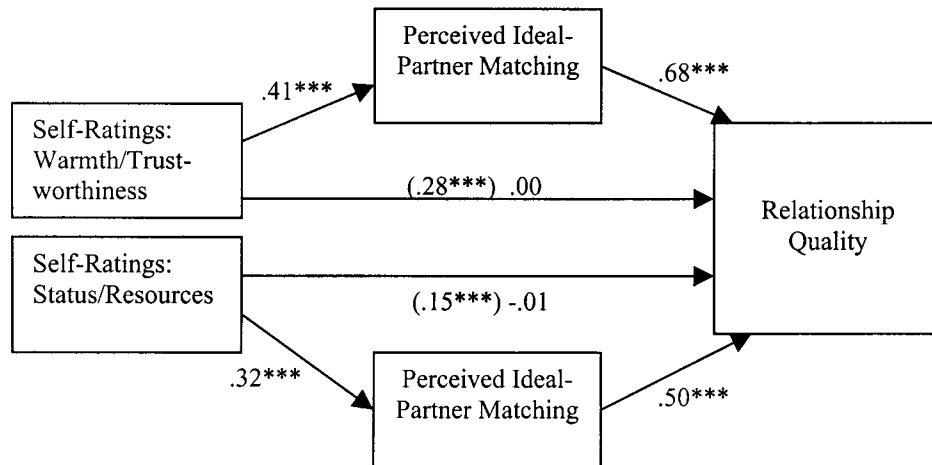
isfied with their relationship when they were confronted with large partner discrepancies than were less flexible people. In contrast, those with less flexible ideals were less satisfied when partner discrepancies were larger. Having more flexible ideals may allow people to be less critical of and less concerned about relatively large discrepancies that exist between current perceptions and ideals, permitting them to sustain more positive relationship perceptions. This pattern of results remained significant when measures of CL and CLalt (i.e., global perceptions of the partner/relationship) were controlled.

The results of Study 1 also are consistent with the postulate that self-perceptions might anchor the formation of related ideals and flexibility of ideals. Individuals with more positive self-perceptions on a given dimension should be able to set their ideals at higher levels and demand that their prospective partners come reasonably close to meeting their ideals. In addition, we found support for a model in which more positive self-perceptions are related to lower partner discrepancies, which, in turn, is related to higher relationship satisfaction.

However, not all of the results of Study 1 supported our predictions. Specifically, there was no evidence that flexibility of ideals moderated the link between partner discrepancies on vitality/attractiveness and perceived relationship quality. Moreover, we examined only one partner in each relationship in Study 1, which limits the way in which the Ideal Standards Model can be tested. Therefore, in Study 2, we sought to replicate the pattern of findings obtained in Study 1 and assessed the perceptions of both members of each dating couple.

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, associations between ideal partner standards, ideal flexibility, and perceived relationship quality were examined in both members of dating couples to



**Figure 2** Mediation model: Study 1.

NOTE: Values are standardized regression coefficients. Coefficients in parentheses are the values when partner discrepancies are not controlled. \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

investigate the interdependence that exists between partners with respect to their ideal standards and relationship evaluations. Using new data analytic procedures (the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model [APIM] (Kashy & Kenny, in press), we wanted to test how being perceived as falling short of (vs. closely matching) a partner's ideal standards affects an individual's own assessment of relationship quality.

Study 1 confirmed that smaller partner discrepancies predicted more positive perceptions of the relationship. However, people also may evaluate the quality of their relationships by how closely they match their partner's ideal standards. Murray et al. (1996) have found that both dating and married people's reports of relationship satisfaction are related to how positively or negatively their partners viewed them (see also Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Thus, people may use information concerning how their partners perceive them when evaluating the quality of their current relationship. According to the Ideal Standards Model, people should evaluate the quality of their relationships based on how closely their partners match their own ideal standards and also (independently) on how closely they match their partner's ideal standards.

The APIM estimates both the effect that one person's predictor variable score has on his or her own outcome variable score (known as the "actor" effect) as well as the effect that one person's predictor variable score has on his or her partner's outcome variable score (known as the "partner" effect). The APIM makes the assumption that the data from the two couple members are not independent and therefore treats dyad rather than individual as the unit of analysis. Actor and partner effects can be estimated using a number of analytic methods, but in

the present study we used the pooled-regression procedure (for a full account of this and other methods for estimating actor and partner effects, see Kashy & Kenny, in press).

In the APIM, actor and partner effects are estimated simultaneously, controlling for each other. This control is important because the variance in relationship satisfaction associated with one's own partner discrepancy is removed before his or her relationship satisfaction is predicted by how closely this person matches his or her partners' ideals. The actor effects, therefore, resemble the effects obtained by more traditional analytic approaches, but they control for the potential influence of the partner. The partner effects directly model the interdependence that exists between relationship partners.

To demonstrate actor and partner effects in relationships, consider a hypothetical relationship between John and Mary. John may perceive Mary as closely approximating his ideal partner. This low partner discrepancy should make John feel satisfied with his relationship (i.e., an actor effect). In addition, the low discrepancy between John's perceptions of Mary and his ideal standards might affect Mary's happiness—she should report greater relationship quality the more John's perceptions of her match his ideals (i.e., a partner effect).

Using the APIM, we predicted that both actor and partner effects should be found with partner discrepancy ratings on the three ideal dimensions in Study 2. For example, the male partner in each relationship should be more satisfied the more he perceives that his female partner matches his ideals, and the female partner should be more satisfied the more he thinks she matches his ideal standards. The actor effects should



**TABLE 4: Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities of the Ideal Scales and Relationship Quality Index: Study 2**

	Mean		t	Reliability	
	Men	Women		Men	Women
Warmth/trustworthiness					
Self-ratings	5.56 (0.69)	5.68 (0.69)	1.41	.90	.91
Ideal ratings	5.98 (0.58)	6.31 (0.47)	4.77****	.92	.90
Partner discrepancies	5.94 (0.84)	6.01 (0.88)	0.73	.95	.96
Flexibility ratings	7.13 (1.15)	7.50 (1.19)	2.37**	.95	.96
Status/resources					
Self-ratings	4.81 (0.88)	4.70 (0.71)	-1.03	.87	.86
Ideal ratings	4.27 (0.99)	4.79 (0.96)	4.25****	.85	.86
Partner discrepancies	5.68 (1.02)	5.77 (0.86)	0.82	.93	.92
Flexibility ratings	5.51 (1.62)	6.09 (1.68)	2.85***	.93	.93
Vitality/attractiveness					
Self-ratings	5.24 (0.71)	5.04 (0.72)	-2.39***	.76	.55
Ideal ratings	5.39 (0.63)	5.42 (0.66)	0.41	.73	.79
Partner discrepancies	5.64 (0.91)	5.83 (0.78)	1.87*	.83	.82
Flexibility ratings	6.55 (1.23)	6.43 (1.40)	-0.73	.82	.76
Relationship quality	-0.10 (2.69)	0.10 (2.50)	0.94	.93	.92

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Degrees of freedom for the matched pairs *t* tests were 103.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

conceptually replicate the results obtained in Study 1, whereas the partner effects are unique to this approach in Study 2.

Another major aim of Study 2 was to replicate some of the major findings of Study 1. First, we predicted that ideal flexibility should once again moderate the association between partner discrepancies and perceived relationship quality, along the same lines as previously described.

Second, we tested the mediation model outlined in Study 1 once again, but this time with both relationship partners. We predicted that more positive self-perceptions would be associated with lower partner discrepancies, which in turn should produce greater perceived relationship quality. However, by using couples, we could control for and assess the effects of couple interdependence. We did this using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which, for example, allows male self-perceptions and partner discrepancies to be controlled for while assessing the impact of female judgments on the same dimensions. SEM also permits the analysis of paths that cross from one gender to the other. This not only allows for the replication of the APIM results but provides a way of testing whether self-perceptions are related to partner discrepancies.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study included 104 heterosexual dating couples. At least 1 member of each dyad was enrolled in introduc-

tory psychology at Texas A&M University and received partial course credit for his or her participation. The average length of relationships was 17.50 months ( $SD = 18.04$  months).

### Procedure

Both members of each dating couple reported to an experimental room. Couples were told that they would be asked to complete questionnaires regarding how they perceive themselves, their current relationship, and their current dating partner. It was explained that all responses were confidential and that their responses would not be revealed to anyone, including their dating partners. Each partner was then escorted to a private room to ensure that partners could not communicate while completing the survey. After completion, both partners were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

### Materials

The same materials used in Study 1 were administered in Study 2. As in Study 1, scales were embedded within a large battery of questionnaires. For the three relationship quality measures (i.e., satisfaction, love, and commitment), Cronbach's alphas ranged from .82 to .92 for both men and women. All three measures were highly correlated (for both men and women,  $r$ s ranged from .61 to .74). Principal-axis factor analyses conducted separately on men and women once again indicated that all three measures loaded highly on a single factor. Therefore, items from each scale were standardized (using *z* scores) and aggregated, with higher values indi-

**TABLE 5: Zero-Order Correlations Between the Ideals Scales, Relationship Quality, and Partners' Ratings: Study 2**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Warmth/trustworthiness													
1. Self-ratings	<b>.15</b>												
2. Ideal ratings	.48***	<b>.17*</b>											
3. Flexibility ratings	.48***	.46***	<b>.14</b>										
4. Partner discrepancies	.42***	.35***	.39***	<b>.43**</b>									
Status/resources													
5. Self-ratings	.57***	.26***	.28***	.21***	<b>.03</b>								
6. Ideal ratings	.26**	.49***	.23**	.11	.43***	<b>.16*</b>							
7. Flexibility ratings	.31***	.23***	.71***	.17**	.44***	.47***	<b>.18*</b>						
8. Partner discrepancies	.44***	.35***	.39***	.80***	.23***	.21***	.33***	<b>.23**</b>					
Vitality/attractiveness													
9. Self-ratings	.35***	.15**	.22***	.17***	.47***	.27***	.33***	.24***	<b>.30***</b>				
10. Ideal ratings	.09	.17**	.06	.08	.04	.44***	.15**	.07	.30***	<b>.24**</b>			
11. Flexibility ratings	.17**	.10	.43***	.10	.17***	.24***	.62***	.13	.39***	.55***	<b>.21**</b>		
12. Partner discrepancies	.38***	.26***	.26***	.66***	.22***	.16	.20**	.73***	.25***	.13	.18**	<b>.21**</b>	
13. Relationship quality	.27***	.24***	.25***	.63***	.04	-.05	.05	.51***	.09	.03	.12	.41***	<b>.50***</b>

NOTE: Correlations are calculated across the entire sample. Correlations between partner's ratings appear along the diagonal. \* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

cating greater perceived relationship quality. As in Study 1, this scale was labeled “relationship quality.” Means and internal consistencies for this and all of the ideal scales are presented in Table 4.

Participants also rated their partners on the items contained in Murray et al.'s (1996) Interpersonal Quality Components Scale. This scale assesses global evaluations of the partner. These partner ratings were included to determine whether the predicted actor and partner effects were independent of how people generally view their partners.

**RESULTS**

The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for the ideals scales and the perceived relationship quality index are shown in Table 4. Similar to Study 1, women's standards for an ideal partner on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension were higher than they were for men, and women reported being slightly less flexible on this dimension than did men. Similarly, women's standards for an ideal partner on the status/resources dimension were higher than they were for men, and women also reported being less flexible than men. For the vitality/attractiveness dimension, men rated themselves higher than did women, and women reported that they perceived their partners as matching their ideals on this dimension slightly more than did men, although this effect was only marginally significant.

*Self, Ideals, and Flexibility*

Similar to Study 1, correlations were calculated between self, ideal partner standards, flexibility, and partner discrepancy ratings. These correlations are presented in Table 5. Tests of dependent correlations indicated no significant gender differences. Therefore, the correlations below the diagonal in Table 5 are calculated across the entire sample, whereas the diagonal contains the correlations between partners. Replicating results from Study 1 across gender and dimension, people with more positive self-ratings set higher ideal standards ( $M r = .40$ ), and they are also less flexible regarding the size of the discrepancy they are willing to accept ( $M r = .44$ ). Furthermore, people who hold higher ideal standards are less flexible regarding those standards ( $M r = .49$ ).

*Actor and Partner Effects*

For the next set of analyses, the APIM (Kashy & Kenny, in press) was used to predict perceived relationship quality separately for each ideal dimension. A hierarchical regression procedure was used to estimate the actor and partner effects. The predictor variables included partner discrepancy ratings, ideal flexibility, and the interaction between partner discrepancies and ideal flexibility. Gender also was included as a predictor, as were the interactions involving gender and each of the above variables. All predictor variables were standardized prior to these analyses, based on means and standard deviations calculated for the entire sample aver-

aged across gender. The dependent variable in all analyses was perceived relationship quality. The actor and partner effects estimated in this model are unstandardized regression coefficients. Therefore, each coefficient represents the amount of change in perceived relationship quality given a 1 standard deviation change in the predictor variable. There were no gender differences; therefore, gender is not discussed further. Results for each dimension are presented in Table 6.

A significant actor effect of partner discrepancy emerged for each dimension, suggesting that perceived relationship quality scores were higher for individuals who perceived that their partners matched their ideals. There was also a significant actor effect for flexibility for the vitality/attractiveness dimension, suggesting that people with more stringent standards on this dimension were less satisfied. The actor effect interaction between partner discrepancies and flexibility was significant for both the vitality/attractiveness dimension and the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. The patterns of the interactions are nearly identical to those found in Study 1 (see Figure 1). As predicted, people reported greater relationship quality when their partners more closely matched their ideals, especially when they were less flexible. When the discrepancies were large, perceived relationship quality was low, particularly when people were less flexible. Unlike Study 1, however, the interaction was significant for the vitality/attractiveness dimension rather than the status/resources dimension.

The predicted pattern of partner effects also emerged. For each dimension, people reported lower perceived relationship quality the more they failed to match their partner's ideals and significantly higher perceived relationship quality the more closely they matched their partner's ideals. Controlling for the actor effects, then, individuals' perceived relationship quality was influenced by how they compared to their partners' ideal standards.

#### *Alternative Explanations*

As in Study 1, it is possible that the partner discrepancy ratings are confounded with global partner perceptions. That is, people who have more positive impressions of their partners may report smaller discrepancies, and vice versa. Partner perceptions, therefore, and not partner discrepancies, may be responsible for the reported results. To discount this possibility, partner ratings were controlled in all of the above analyses. Out of the nine significant effects reported in Table 6, only two became nonsignificant when partner ratings were controlled: the partner effects for vitality/attractiveness and status/resources on the partner discrepancy measure.

**TABLE 6: Actor-Partner Results: Study 2**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Actor</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Warmth/trustworthiness				
Partner discrepancies	1.71****	.51***	.17	.32
Flexibility ratings	-0.11	-.17	.16	.02
Partner Discrepancies				
Flexibility	0.27**	.18	.13	.03
Vitality/attractiveness				
Partner discrepancies	1.43****	.46****	.17	.26
Flexibility ratings	-0.33**	-.26	.16	.02
Partner Discrepancies				
Flexibility	0.35**	.13	.14	.03
Status/resources				
Partner discrepancies	1.04****	.48****	.17	.13
Flexibility ratings	0.03	-.05	.17	.01
Partner Discrepancies				
Flexibility	0.19	.11	.17	.02

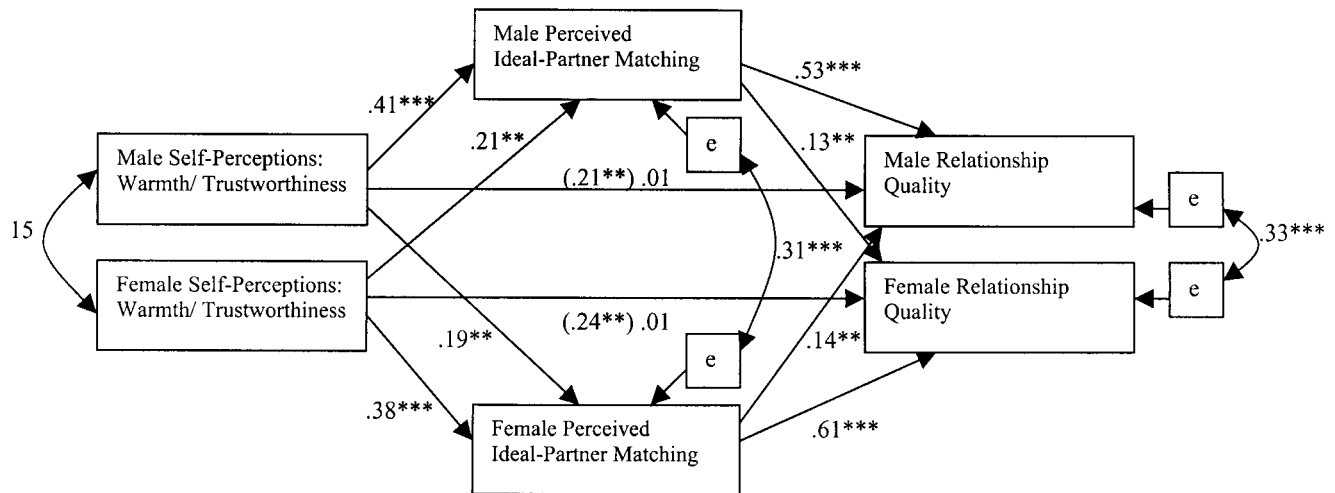
NOTE: Actor and partner effects are reported as unstandardized regression coefficients. *R*<sup>2</sup> is the proportion of variance accounted for by both the actor and partner effects.

\*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\*\**p* < .001.

#### *Mediation Model*

We again tested to see whether partner discrepancies mediated the link between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality. Self-perceptions were significantly related to perceived relationship quality for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, making this the only dimension to consider for mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The model that was tested is displayed in Figure 3. The EQS Structural Equation Modeling program was used to test the model (Bentler, 1995). New to this model are the paths from each partner's self-perceptions to each other's partner discrepancy ratings and the paths from the latter ratings to each other's ratings of perceived relationship quality. All of the paths were set to be equal across gender.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the errors for partner discrepancy ratings and perceived relationship quality were allowed to correlate between partners. The significance of the test statistics was based on the number of couples in the sample. A nonsignificant chi-square value and a comparative fit index (CFI) value greater than .90 signify good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1995).

The model fit very well,  $\chi^2(7, N = 104) = 10.69, p = .15, ns, CFI = .98$ . Specifically, more positive self-ratings were related to smaller partner discrepancies, and smaller partner discrepancies predicted higher perceived relationship quality. The paths from self-perceptions to perceived relationship quality, however, dropped to zero when partner discrepancy ratings were included. According to Sobel's test (see Baron & Kenny, 1986), the indirect effects of self-perception on perceived relationship quality were significant for both men and women,  $z =$



**Figure 3** Mediation model: Study 2.

NOTE: Values are standardized EQS coefficients. Coefficients in parentheses are the values when partner discrepancies are not controlled. "e" represents the error term for each variable.

\*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

5.68,  $p < .01$ . Similar to Study 1, partner discrepancy ratings completely mediated the relation between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality. In addition, individuals also reported smaller partner discrepancies when their partners saw themselves as scoring high on these attributes. Furthermore, paralleling the partner effects estimated by the APIM, individuals reported greater relationship quality if they more closely matched their partner's ideals.

#### DISCUSSION

The APIM analyses yielded both actor and partner effects. As predicted, the actor effects replicated the results of Study 1. In particular, the degree to which individuals perceived that their partners matched their ideals on each dimension predicted perceived relationship quality. Of importance, these effects remained significant when perceptions of the partner were controlled, suggesting that the partner discrepancy measure is not strongly confounded with overall partner perceptions. This pattern of results, therefore, replicated across two independent data sets using two different data analytic methods.

The prediction that ideal flexibility would moderate the relation between partner-ideal matching and perceived relationship quality was partially supported in Study 2.

As in Study 1, an interaction emerged for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. It also emerged for the vitality/attractiveness dimension in Study 2 but not for the status/resources dimension (recall that this

interaction occurred for the status/resources and not the vitality/attractiveness dimension in Study 1). Furthermore, no gender differences were found, suggesting that these effects apply to both partners in a relationship. Thus, regardless of an individual's gender, ideal standards are related to perceived relationship quality, and flexibility moderates this relationship most robustly for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. These interactions also remained significant after controlling for partner perceptions. However, these interactions emerged only as actor effects. It may be easier to infer a partner's ideal standards or evaluate where one falls relative to a partner's ideal standards than it is to infer the partner's degree of flexibility. This could explain why partner effects were not found for this interaction.

The moderation effects may have been more robust for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension because these traits are linked to relationship satisfaction at all stages and periods of relationship development (see Brehm, 1992, for a review). Attributes associated with warmth and trustworthiness are central to the development and maintenance of intimacy in nearly all relationships. In addition, individuals may focus more on vitality/attractiveness attributes at the beginning of most relationships (Brislin & Lewis, 1968; Byrne, Ervin, & Lamberth, 1970; Tesser & Brodie, 1971). Because most of the participants in this study were involved in long-term relationships and had not yet accumulated much status or resources, these dimensions may have been less important to perceptions of relationship quality than the warmth/trustworthiness dimension.

Most important, the predicted partner effects emerged in Study 2. People who fell short of their partner's ideals reported less relationship quality than did those who more closely matched their partner's ideals. This pattern of results was found for each of the three ideal dimensions. This suggests that individuals not only may use their ideal standards to evaluate their partners and relationships (i.e., actor effects) but that perceived relationship quality also is uniquely affected by the degree to which individuals favorably compare with their partners' ideal standards (i.e., partner effects). After controlling for partner ratings, the partner effect for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension remained significant. As discussed previously, this dimension tends to be important at all stages of relationship development; therefore, it is not surprising that the partner effects for this dimension are most robust when controlling for global partner perceptions.

The partner effects capture what happens when a person does not meet his or her partner's ideal standards, controlling for the actor effects. For example, if a man perceives that he is not meeting his partner's ideals, he may feel threatened and insecure in the relationship and his relationship satisfaction may gradually decline. Although the partner effects were consistent across all three dimensions, we still do not know how the process works. A person may, for instance, communicate to his or her partner that he or she does not match this person's ideals. This communication may be direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal. In addition, some individuals may erroneously infer that they do not meet their partner's ideals when, in fact, their partner believes that they do. Additional research is required to demonstrate how people infer how closely they match their partner's ideals and, thus, to clarify the reasons underlying this partner effect.

As predicted, when controlling for partner effects, partner discrepancy ratings mediated the link between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality, but only for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. This pattern of results is consistent with our previous theorizing. Specifically, intimacy-related ideals and perceptions in relationships should be among the most central and important factors that people use to rate their partners in long-term relationships, and judgments of warmth/trustworthiness are inherently ambiguous and open to distortion. These two factors might explain why more positive self-perceptions lead to smaller partner discrepancies, which, in turn, produce greater relationship satisfaction. This process should be accentuated when the motive for enhancement is strongly activated or when the individual has had the time, motivation, and opportunity to change the nature of the relationship.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, these studies add to our understanding of ideals in close relationships in several ways. Support was provided for the significant role that partner discrepancies have on relationship quality judgments in two independent samples, using two different data analytic approaches, even after controlling for a number of potential confounds. Guided by predictions derived from the Ideal Standards Model, support also was provided for both the moderating effects of flexibility on relationship quality assessments and for the mediating role of partner discrepancies between self-ratings and perceived relationship quality. The moderating effects revealed that people reported the highest perceived relationship quality when their partners matched their ideals more closely and individuals were less flexible. Perceived relationship quality was poorest, in contrast, when partner discrepancies were large and individuals were less flexible. The mediating effects indicated that more positive self-ratings were related to smaller partner discrepancies, and smaller partner discrepancies, in turn, predicted higher perceived relationship quality. Finally, this is the first time that partner effects have been predicted, tested, and documented concerning relations between how one person's ideal standards affect their partner's perceived relationship quality.

#### *Ideal Flexibility*

Ideal flexibility appears to play an important role in affecting assessments of relationship quality. When people determine the discrepancy between their current partner and their ideal standards, their degree of flexibility should help them decide how large the disparity can be before regulatory behaviors are needed to reduce it.

Although the functional value of flexibility is clear, the factors that generate the degree of flexibility are not known. Both self-ratings and ideal standards were positively correlated with how flexible individuals were in both studies, suggesting that self-perceptions may influence the establishment of both ideal standards and their degree of flexibility. However, other factors might contribute to the calibration of flexibility. For instance, people may be more flexible on ideal dimensions that are less important to them. This prospect is suggested by the positive correlations between individuals' ideal standards and their flexibility. The nature of the interactions that people have with members of the opposite gender (prior to establishing a relationship) or experiences within their current relationship also may influence flexibility. For instance, recent rejections by opposite-gender persons may lead an individual to become more flexible and willing to accept others with qualities that do not closely match his or her ideal standards (Simpson et al.,

in press). Alternately, if the motive for relationship and partner idealization is paramount and partner discrepancies are large, increasing the flexibility of one's ideals could be a short-term solution to maintaining relationship satisfaction or commitment.

At present, we do not know how stable ideal flexibility is relative to ideal standards. Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas (1999) have shown that ideal standards are relatively stable but that people do shift their ideals in response to partner discrepancies over a 3-month period. We suspect, however, that ideal flexibility may be more malleable than ideal standards. Adjusting one's flexibility may be more desirable and less costly than shifting well-established ideal standards. People may adjust their degree of flexibility to defend and maintain their ideal standards while at the same time acknowledging that their partners do not fully match these standards. In essence, there may be situations in which people cling to their ideals when faced with large but possibly transient partner discrepancies, adopting a wait-and-see strategy.

#### *Comparisons of Self With the Partner's Ideals*

Earlier versions of the Ideal Standards Model focused on discrepancies between individuals' own ideal standards and perceptions of their current partners. The present research presents the first formal test of whether people also are sensitive to how closely they match their partners' ideals. For all three ideal dimensions, and for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension even after controlling for global partner ratings, the significant partner effects indicated that perceived relationship quality was independently predicted by how closely individuals matched their partners' ideal standards. These results suggest that (a) people may evaluate their partners/relationships according to both their own as well as their partners' standards and (b) people may base regulatory decisions on both comparisons. If individuals believe that their partners fall short of their ideal standards, they may decide to leave the relationship or alter either their flexibility, their ideal standards, or their perceptions of their current partner/relationship. These adjustments should make partner discrepancies less threatening or possibly decrease their magnitude. Individuals are in a very different position, however, when they believe that they fall short of their partners' ideal standards. Such persons may have to engage in different regulatory behaviors to reduce the size of their partner's discrepancy. For instance, an individual may have to avoid conflict and showcase his or her best qualities in an effort to more closely meet his or her partner's standards. If this person succeeds, the result ought to be improved relationship quality for both partners.

The emotions associated with each discrepancy also should differ. A person who perceives his or her partner as falling short of his or her ideals, for example, may feel less satisfied with the relationship and be disappointed, whereas a person who fails to match his or her partner's ideals may feel guilty and experience threats to his or her self-esteem. Further research must determine whether people engage in different types of relationship regulatory behaviors based on the source (self vs. partner) of discrepancies and the specific emotions associated with each type of discrepancy.

#### *The Role of the Self*

This research supports the view that self-perceptions play an important role in understanding the content and structure of ideal standards. Past theorizing has typically viewed the links between self-esteem and ideals in a global, generically positive fashion. However, we believe that associations between perceptions of the self, ideal partners, partner discrepancies, and relationship assessments should operate along specific ideal dimensions. In this research, we found that more positive self-perceptions on all three ideal dimensions were associated with smaller partner discrepancies. However, as we predicted, only in the case of the warmth/trustworthiness dimension did partner discrepancies consistently mediate the link between self-perceptions and perceived relationship quality.

One major advantage of investigating mate selection in terms of the three ideal dimensions postulated in the Ideal Standards Model, rather than in terms of a single global positivity dimension, is that multiple dimensions allow for logical trade-offs. For example, an individual might perceive himself or herself as unattractive, moderately well off in terms of status and resources, but exceptionally warm and trustworthy. Meaningful relations between this individual's self-perceptions, ideal standards, and relationship satisfaction could not be understood unless information about each ideal dimension was gathered separately. More speculatively, an individual's self-concept might be structured around the three ideal dimensions, at least in relationship domains.

#### *Caveats and Conclusions*

The present research advances our understanding of how ideal standards, ideal flexibility, and self-ratings affect relationship judgments, but it also raises many intriguing questions. Although ideal flexibility moderated perceived relationship quality assessments as we predicted, the precise origins and functions of ideal flexibility remain speculative. Similarly, the suggestion that people may engage in relationship regulatory behaviors depending on how closely they match their partner's ideal standards also remains speculative. Although peo-

ple evaluate their relationships less positively when they fall short of their partner's ideals, they also may act in ways to reduce their partner's discrepancy perceptions across time.

One limitation of the current research is that all of the data are cross-sectional in nature. Hence, it is not possible to draw causal inferences from the present studies. Experimental or longitudinal research is needed to pinpoint the causes of ideal flexibility, to clarify the role that flexibility plays in relationship well-being over time, and to identify the regulatory behaviors that are engaged in by people who fall short of their partner's ideal standards.

It also may be possible that people occasionally encounter potential partners who surpass their ideal standards. If this occurs, many people might be pleased to date these individuals. However, some people might feel threatened by persons who greatly surpass their ideals, preventing them from pursuing a relationship. The present research cannot test these possibilities because our measures only assessed whether current partners matched (not exceeded) each individual's ideals. Future research should address how ideal standards and their flexibility are related to perceptions of relationship quality when dating partners actually exceed an individual's ideal standards.

Nonetheless, this research provides support for several basic predictions derived from the Ideal Standards Model. It also provides new insights into how self-perceptions are related to ideal standards and their flexibility, and it reveals the way in which ideal flexibility is related to partner perceptions and relationship quality. Investigating the role of ideal standards in close relationships is likely to increase our understanding of both the structure and functions of relationship cognition.

## NOTES

1. This technique for assessing partner discrepancies is different than the one employed by Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999). We wanted to demonstrate that predictions derived from the Ideal Standards Model could be supported using different methods of assessing partner discrepancies.

2. LaGrange Multiplier tests (Lee & Bentler, 1980) were computed to determine whether the paths that were set to be equal were statistically different from each other. These tests revealed no gender differences in this model. Note that although the paths were set to be equal, the standardized path coefficients for men and women can differ slightly due to differences in the variances of the observed variables.

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