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Trait emotional intelligence, conflict communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction

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Abstract

We examined trait emotional intelligence (EI), conflict communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction in cohabiting heterosexual couples. Participants were 82 couples ($N = 164$) who completed the TEI-Que – Short Form (Petrides & Furnham, 2006), the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), and the Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The most satisfied couples were those who did not avoid discussion of relationship problems and who rated their partners high in EI. Satisfied couples were more likely than dissatisfied couples to perceive themselves as having levels of EI similar to their partner. We also examined whether actor or partner effects, or a combination of the two, best predicted relationship satisfaction and found that actor variables were the only significant predictors. These results are discussed with reference to the importance of EI and communication patterns in relationship satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Do couples high in trait emotional intelligence (EI) report greater relationship satisfaction? While much has been written about EI in the last decade and while, intuitively, it would seem

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to have obvious conceptual relevance to relationships, few studies have examined EI and its links to relationship satisfaction. The current study sought to examine whether couples' EI and conflict communication patterns relate to couples' relationship satisfaction. As many studies of couples report responses from only one member of the dyad, we were interested in the responses of both individuals in order to gain a more complete view of couples' perceptions. Specifically, we examined the extent that couples' relationship satisfaction was predicted by self-reported and/or estimates of spouses' EI and perceptions of communication patterns.

1.1. Emotional intelligence

EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) is a personality trait that involves a constellation of self-perceived emotion-related abilities and dispositions that are typically measured via self-report instruments (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Petrides and colleagues have argued that the construct captures individual differences in affective self-evaluations and integrates the emotion-related facets of the Giant Three and Big Five personality taxonomies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). The facets of EI are: adaptability; assertiveness; the perception, expression, management and regulation of emotions; self-esteem; low impulsiveness; relationship skills; self-motivation; stress management; social competence; trait empathy; trait happiness; and trait optimism (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). It thus integrates the affective facets of personality into one trait and meaningfully adds to existing knowledge of personality.

In less than a decade, researchers have built a considerable body of evidence to demonstrate that EI is a valid construct that has discriminant, criterion and incremental validity when compared with existing personality dimensions (Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Pérez, Petrides, & Furnham, 2005). With respect to discriminant validity, researchers have shown that EI is correlated with existing personality dimensions, but not so highly as to be redundant (Petrides et al., 2007), and is unrelated to intelligence (Schutte et al., 1998). EI has also been shown to have good criterion validity. For instance, it is positively correlated with happiness (Furnham & Petrides, 2003), life satisfaction and adaptive coping styles (Petrides et al., 2007), physical, mental, and psychosomatic health (Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2006), and skill at identifying emotional expressions and mood management behaviour in adolescents (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001).

Researchers have also demonstrated that EI has incremental validity, such that it predicts unique variance in life satisfaction (Petrides et al., 2007; Petrides, Pita, et al., 2007), happiness (Furnham & Petrides, 2003), coping and rumination (Petrides et al., 2007), and school truancy in adolescents (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). Clinically, EI has been shown to predict personality disorders and depression (Petrides et al., 2007). In experimental studies, EI has predicted recognition of facial expressions and sensitivity to mood induction tasks (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Thus, there is evidence to demonstrate that EI is an important affective personality construct.

Few studies have examined the links between EI and relationship satisfaction. In one study, married participants were asked to rate both their own and their spouse's EI (Schutte et al., 2001). Participants with higher self-reported EI reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction than those participants with lower self-rated EI. Furthermore, those participants who rated

their partners higher in EI also reported higher scores for relationship satisfaction. However, this study only looked at self-reports, and it is unknown whether the partner rating would have differed from the partner's self-reported rating.

1.2. Conflict communication patterns

Communication has long been a research focus for marital researchers and many studies have found an association between communication and relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991). More recent studies have focused on a family systems perspective that emphasizes the importance of viewing marital interaction as a communication system of interdependent patterns of interaction (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Some patterns of interaction reflect active and constructive negotiation of differences, whereas other patterns reflect a general tendency to avoid conflict and/or enact behaviours that undermine the union (Christensen, 1987). For instance, couples who report openly discussing issues, expressing their feelings in a positive way, and working towards a mutually agreeable resolution to problems report increased satisfaction (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Noller & White, 1990). Couples who report a pattern of demanding and withdrawing tend to experience declines in relationship satisfaction over time (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995) and divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

1.3. Aims and rationale

There appears to be no research explicitly connecting EI to communication patterns and relationship satisfaction in cohabiting heterosexual couples. Thus the aim of this study was to explore these relationships. First, based on Schutte et al. (2001), it is hypothesised that EI will be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (H1). Secondly, following from established connections between personality variables and perceptions of couples' conflict communication patterns (Heaven, Smith, Prabhakar, Abraham, & Mete, 2006), it is anticipated that EI scores will be positively associated with perceptions of constructive communication patterns (H2) and negatively associated with perceptions of demanding and withdrawing, and avoidance and withholding patterns (H3). Finally, we were interested in exploring individuals' estimates of their spouses' EI. It may be that an individual's perception of their spouse's EI is as important a predictor of relationship satisfaction as the individual's self-rated EI. As no research has looked at this effect, we posed the question: are individuals' ratings of their spouses' EI related to individuals' self-reported EI, perceptions of conflict communication patterns and/or relationship satisfaction? (RQ1). Before proceeding, in order to ensure clarity of terms, hereafter "self-reported EI" is the individual's rating of his or her own EI, while "estimates of spouse's EI" is the individual's rating of his or her spouse's EI.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Using network sampling, 82 heterosexual cohabiting couples were recruited. An initial group of participants was identified through the researcher's network of acquaintances and subsequent par-

ticipants were found through recommendations of earlier participants. This method of sampling has been used in other studies examining couples (Heaven et al., 2006). Participants resided in the Sydney-Wollongong region of New South Wales. Women participants ranged in age from 20 to 79 years ($M = 47$, $SD = 17$), and men ranged in age from 22 to 80 years ($M = 49$, $SD = 17$). Of the total, 67 couples (82%) were married and 15 (18%) were not. Three couples (4%) had been together for less than 1 year, 8 couples (10%) had been together for between 1 and 3 years, 8 (10%) had been together for between 3 and 5 years, 15 couples (18%) had been together for between 6 and 10 years, and 48 couples (58%) had been together for more than 10 years. Of all the participants, 28 (34%) had a high school education or less, 20 (24%) had a technical college education, while 34 (42%) had a university education. With respect to income, 28 couples (34%) had a combined family income of more than A\$100,000 per annum.

Couples were provided with a test booklet that contained two questionnaires, two consent forms, and two envelopes in which to return the questionnaires and consent forms separately. Couples were instructed not to discuss the questionnaire with their partner until the questionnaire session was concluded.

2.2. Measures

Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF). The TEIQue-SF yields a global measure of EI (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). It is a 30-item self-report measure that uses two items from each of the 15 facet subscales (see discussion of facets above) of the TEIQue long form (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). The TEIQue-SF has been shown to have adequate reliability and validity (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). Participants are asked to rate their degree of agreement with each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (7). Participants completed two versions of the TEIQue-SF, one for their own self-reported EI and an estimate of their spouses' EI. Alpha coefficients were self-reported EI = .94 and estimate of spouse's EI = .95.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ). The CPQ (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a 35-item self-report instrument designed to assess the extent to which couples employ various types of interaction strategies when dealing with a relationship problem. Each partner indicates what typically occurs in their relationship on a nine-point Likert scale ranging from *very unlike us* (1) to *very like us* (9). In this study four subscales were used: (a) the constructive communication subscale, (b) the female demand and male withdraw subscale, (c) the male demand and female withdraw subscale, and (d) the mutual avoidance and withholding subscale.

The constructive communication subscale has six items and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient in our study was .81. The female demand and man withdraw subscale contains three items as does the man demand and female withdraw subscale. Alpha coefficients were .80 (woman demand and man withdraw) and .81 (man demand and woman withdraw). The mutual avoidance and withholding subscale contains three items and the Cronbach's alpha was .66.

Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory. The PRQC (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) is designed to measure individuals' evaluations of their relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love. We used the satisfaction subscale (three items) because it measures satisfaction as a pure variable and does not conflate it with other behaviours which may inflate the results (sample item: "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Each

partner evaluates their relationship on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (7). Cronbach's alpha was .91.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the mean scores for men and women on self-reported EI, estimates of their spouse's EI, perceptions of communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction. In order to test for gender differences, paired sample *t*-tests were conducted. No gender differences were found on the EI, perceptions of communication patterns or relationship satisfaction measures; all $p > .1$.

3.2. Correlations

We next calculated the relationships between male and female scores on EI, the communication patterns scales, and relationship satisfaction. Table 2 shows that men's and women's scores were positively correlated on all the conflict communication subscales and on relationship satisfaction, effects that have also been reported elsewhere (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). However, when we re-ran the correlations controlling for length of cohabitation, the correlation between men's and women's perceptions of avoidance and withholding was only marginally significant ($r = .22$, $n = 81$, $p = .06$). All other relationships remained significant.

There was no assortative mating for EI; thus men's and women's scores were not correlated on self-reported or on estimates of their spouses' EI. However, men's self-reported EI was correlated with female estimates of spouses' EI ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), and likewise, women's self-reported EI was correlated with male estimates of spouses' EI ($r = .40$, $p < .001$). This suggests that there was some agreement between couples as to the estimates of each partner's EI. We also found that men's self-reported EI was correlated with men's estimates of their spouses' EI ($r = .45$, $p < .001$) and that women's self-reported EI was correlated with their estimates of their spouses' EI ($r = .25$, $p < .05$).

Table 3 highlights the correlations of men's and women's self-reported EI and estimates of their spouses' EI with perceptions of communication patterns and relationship satisfaction. There was

Table 1
Sex differences on EI, communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction

Scales	Males		Females	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-reported EI	152.18	20.50	154.70	24.08
Estimate of spouse's EI	153.10	20.60	153.60	26.89
Perceptions of constructive communication	49.93	8.44	50.13	9.85
Perceptions of man demand/woman withdraw	9.89	5.22	10.06	6.44
Perceptions of woman demand/man withdraw	11.91	5.84	12.94	6.32
Perceptions of avoidance and withholding	6.05	3.57	6.63	4.19
Reports of satisfaction	18.74	3.07	18.71	3.09

Table 2

Correlations between men's and women's scores on EI, communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction

Scales	<i>r</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-reported EI	.18	80	.11
Estimates of spouse's EI	.09	80	.45
Perceptions of constructive communication	.46**	81	.00
Perceptions of man demand/woman withdraw	.37**	81	.00
Perceptions of woman demand/man withdraw	.50**	81	.00
Perceptions of avoidance and withholding	.25*	81	.02
Reports of satisfaction	.56**	81	.00

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

Table 3

Correlations between men's and women's self-reported and estimates of spouses' EI, and communication patterns and relationship satisfaction

Scales	Males		Females	
	SR EI	ES EI	SR EI	ES EI
<i>Perceptions of constructive communication</i>				
Male perceptions	.46**	.52**	.27*	.31**
Female perceptions	.21	.27*	.50**	.54**
<i>Perceptions of man demand/woman withdraw</i>				
Male perceptions	−.06	−.39**	−.34**	−.09
Female perceptions	−.14	−.43**	−.46**	−.24*
<i>Perceptions of woman demand/man withdraw</i>				
Male perceptions	−.33**	−.35**	−.16	−.28*
Female perceptions	−.15	−.20	−.27*	−.50**
<i>Perceptions of avoidance</i>				
Male perceptions	−.50**	−.29**	−.09	−.31**
Female perception	−.19	−.12	−.22*	−.53**
<i>Reports of satisfaction</i>				
Male satisfaction	.35**	.17	.14	.27*
Female satisfaction	.10	.02	.18	.46**

NB. SR = self-reported. ES = Estimates of spouses'. *N* = 80, 81.* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

partial support for Hypothesis 1 that self-reported EI would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction, as this association was only evident for men. There was support for Hypothesis 2 that self-reported EI would be positively associated with perceptions of constructive communication patterns. There was also general support for Hypothesis 3 that self-rated EI would be negatively associated with perceptions of the more dysfunctional conflict communication patterns. We also re-examined the correlations after controlling for length of cohabitation and found no significant changes.

3.3. Estimates of spouses' EI

We next explored whether individuals' estimates of their spouses' EI related to individuals' self-reported EI, perceptions of conflict communication patterns, and/or relationship satisfaction. **Table 3** presents the correlations of men's and women's estimates of their spouses' EI with perceptions of conflict communication patterns and relationship satisfaction. We found similar effects for estimates of spouses' EI as for self-rated EI; however, the correlations were often larger for estimates of spouses' EI and there were more associations for estimates of the spouse compared to self-rated EI. Again, controlling for length of cohabitation did not result in substantial changes.

3.4. Examining actor and partner effects

We next ran a number of analyses to determine the predictors of couple-level perceptions by examining actor and partner effects. We organised the data into a pair-wise structure and gender was the distinguishing variable (female coded 1, male coded -1; [Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006](#)). We used multilevel modeling to determine the dyad-level perceptions as it allows several dependent variables to be entered and controlled for simultaneously. To identify demographic correlates of relationship satisfaction, we entered age, income level, educational level, and length of relationship, as predictors of satisfaction in the multilevel regression analyses. None of these vari-

Table 4
Multilevel regression analyses predicting relationship satisfaction

Scales	B	SE	t-ratio
<i>Self-rated EI</i>			
Actor	.04 ^{**}	.01	3.6
Partner	.01	.01	0.9
<i>Estimates of spouse's EI</i>			
Actor	.04 ^{**}	.01	4.6
Partner	.02	.01	1.8
<i>Perceptions of constructive communication</i>			
Actor	.11 ^{**}	.03	4.4
Partner	.01	.03	0.4
<i>Perceptions of man demand/woman withdraw</i>			
Actor	-.08	.04	-1.9
Partner	-.05	.04	-1.3
<i>Perceptions of woman demand/man withdraw</i>			
Actor	-.09 [*]	.04	-2.3
Partner	-.07	.04	-1.7
<i>Perceptions of avoidance and withholding</i>			
Actor	-.28 ^{**}	.06	-5.1
Partner	-.09	.06	-1.7

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

ables emerged as statistically reliable predictors. Furthermore, there were no significant effects for gender and gender did not moderate the linkage between EI and satisfaction.

Table 4 shows the results of the analyses testing both the actors' and partners' self-reports and spouse estimates of EI and conflict communication patterns in predicting relationship satisfaction. We found that actor variables only were significantly predictive of satisfaction, except for perceptions of the man demand and woman withdraw communication pattern. Thus there was strong support that self-rated EI predicted satisfaction. In relation to the research question, there was also evidence that estimates of one's spouse's EI predicted satisfaction.

We then examined which variables, when all variables were combined, were significant predictors of relationship satisfaction. Given that none of the partner variables were significant in the earlier analyses, we ran a regression of only the actor variables. Perceptions of avoidance and withholding communication ($B = -.15$, $SE = .059$, $r^2 = .047$, $p = .01$) and estimates of one's spouse's EI ($B = .018$, $SE = .009$, $r^2 = .013$, $p = .05$) were significant and unique predictors of an individual's relationship satisfaction.

3.5. Exploring the effects of satisfaction on perceptions of EI

We ran a number of further analyses to better understand the relationship between perceptions of EI and satisfaction. First, we examined whether satisfied couples would be more similar in reports of EI than dissatisfied couples. We divided partners into high and low satisfaction groups based on a median split. Amongst men, we found a significant difference ($Z = -2.04$, $p < .05$) be-

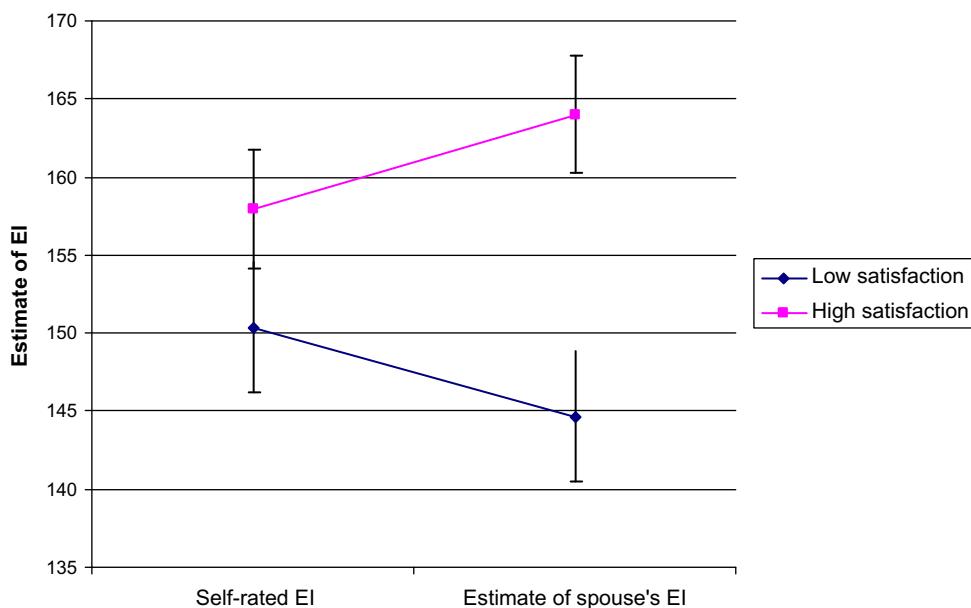


Fig. 1. Comparison of self-rated EI and estimates of spouse's EI amongst women who are satisfied or dissatisfied with their relationship.

tween the size of correlations for self-rated EI and estimate of spouses' EI for low satisfaction ($r = .284, n = 45, p > .05$) and high satisfaction ($r = .654, n = 34, p < .05$). Amongst women, we found a similar difference ($Z = -3.12, p < .01$) for low satisfaction ($r = .025, n = 43, p > .05$) and high satisfaction ($r = .609, n = 36, p < .01$). These effects suggest that satisfied couples were more likely than dissatisfied couples to see themselves as having similar levels of EI.

The above analyses involved the actor making two ratings (for self and spouse). We next examined the strength of relationships involving actor and partner ratings, that is, across raters. We found a significant difference ($Z = -1.91, p < .05$ one-tailed) in perceptions of EI amongst dissatisfied couples ($r = .02, n = 48$) and satisfied couples ($r = .44, n = 30, p < .05$). Thus, satisfied couples tended to have more similar EI self-ratings than dissatisfied couples.

Finally, we examined whether those individuals who reported lower satisfaction, also tended to rate their spouses as low in EI. The effect was not significant for men ($F(1, 77) = .61, MSE = 221.30, p = .44$) but was for women ($F(1, 77) = 8.48, MSE = 451.41, p < .05$). As presented in Fig. 1, dissatisfied women tended to rate their partners' EI lower than their own, while satisfied women tended to rate their spouses' EI higher than their own.

4. Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the effects of EI and conflict communication patterns on the relationship satisfaction of cohabiting couples. We found that individuals' self-rated EI, estimates of their spouses' EI, and perceptions of conflict communication patterns were consistent predictors of relationship satisfaction. We also found that partner variables were not predictive of an individual's level of satisfaction. When we examined all the previously significant actor variables together, perceptions of avoidance and withholding as well as estimates of spouses' EI were the only predictors of satisfaction. We examine these findings in the light of past research.

4.1. *EI and conflict communication patterns*

We found consistent evidence in the correlational analyses that self-reported EI was related to perceptions of all the communication patterns. In the multilevel regression analyses, we also found that actors' perceptions of constructive communication, the woman demand pattern, and avoidance and withholding predicted satisfaction. However, when all the significant actor variables were analysed together, it was the avoidance and withholding communication pattern that was the strongest (and most distinct) predictor of dissatisfaction. This was surprising given the evidence for a strong relationship between the demand–withdraw pattern and dissatisfaction (Christensen, 1987; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). However, in the present sample 58% of respondents had co-habited for longer than 10 years, and perhaps it is the case that avoidance becomes a more corrosive conflict pattern for long-term partners. Indeed, Gottman and Krookoff (1989) found evidence that some conflict engagement resulted in concurrent reductions in satisfaction but not in dissatisfaction over time. However, couples whose conflict was characterised by avoidance and withdrawal reported dissatisfaction over time. The authors speculated that conflict-avoiding couples are at some risk over time because they are not able to gain a sense of “working through” conflict situations (Gottman & Krookoff, 1989).

4.2. Predicting relationship satisfaction

When looking at actor and partner effects in predicting couples' satisfaction, we found strong evidence that actor variables only were predictors. This suggests that, while partners are involved in a relationship with another person, it is their own personality that creates their subjective experience of the relationship and hence their evaluations of satisfaction. Our findings support studies that have concluded that an individual's level of relationship satisfaction is primarily a function of his or her own trait characteristics (e.g. as assessed by the Big Five), rather than the characteristics of the partner, or a combination of both (Neyer & Voigt, 2004; Watson et al., 2000).

However, while we found that individual factors predicted satisfaction, when it came to EI, it was the actor's estimate of their spouse's EI that was the only unique predictor of satisfaction. We thus explored the possibility that actors' estimates of their spouses' EI reflected more about the actors than the spouses they were rating. Research on partner ratings within dyads indicates that ratings contain both valid and invalid components (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). The valid sources are identified by showing that partner ratings of the target individual correlate with both the target's self-ratings and the target's satisfaction (Watson et al., 2000). Our correlations show agreement between targets' self-ratings and partner ratings of targets' EI, but only limited agreement between partner ratings of the target's EI and the target's satisfaction. Furthermore, in relation to the communication and satisfaction variables, we found that there were generally more, and larger, associations between these variables and estimates of spouses' EI than self-rated EI. Together, these findings suggest that biases of some kind were operating when estimating spouses' EI.

Murray et al. (1996) have suggested that partners fill in gaps of knowledge about their spouses by using their self-rated satisfaction as a heuristic. Indeed, positive illusions about one's partner have been shown to predict satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996; Watson et al., 2000). When we examined this possibility, we found that dissatisfied women tended to rate their spouses' EI lower than their own, but that satisfied women tended to estimate their spouses' EI to be higher than their own. This finding is consistent with the possibility that satisfied women held positive illusions about their partner.

We also found that satisfaction was related to perceived similarity of self-rated EI and estimates of spouses' EI, and we found this effect across raters. Whether these spouses were genuinely similar is unknown. There is evidence that some spouses are similar on personality traits (e.g. the Big Five) and that similarity is related to satisfaction (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). What is clear from our study, is that individuals who perceived similarity between their own and their spouse's EI were more satisfied than individuals who saw no similarity.

4.3. Limitations and conclusion

This study is not without its limitations. We employed self-reports to measure both EI and conflict communication patterns, and thus similar positive or negative biases may have occurred in both sets of ratings. Second, we used a small snowball sample of acquaintances of the researchers, and therefore probably overrepresented middle class participants. Third, as our study was correlational in design we are not able to draw conclusions regarding causation.

In summary, this study provides new insights into the role of EI and perceptions of conflict communication patterns on the relationship satisfaction of cohabiting couples. Importantly, we found that an individual's reports were the only salient predictors of relationship satisfaction. When we examined all of the self-rated variables, couples' perceptions of avoidance and withholding communication and estimates of one's spouse's EI predicted satisfaction. We conclude from our findings that the most satisfied couples are those who do not avoid conflict, who tend to see each other as being similar in EI, and who tend to idealize the other's EI to some extent.

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