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The stability and change of trait emotional intelligence, conflict communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction: A one-year longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

We examined the stability and change of trait emotional intelligence (EI), conflict communication patterns and relationship satisfaction in cohabiting heterosexual couples over a 12-month period. Participants were 45 couples ($n = 90$) who completed the TEIQue – Short Form (Petrides & Furnham, 2006), the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), and the Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). We examined both actor and partner effects. We found that, for individuals, the effect of self-rated EI on their own satisfaction was stable over the 12-month period and was not related to changes in satisfaction over time. We also found that women's reports of avoidance and withholding predicted declines in both men's and women's satisfaction over time. We discuss the potential importance of EI and communication patterns in promoting relationship satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

How stable are long-term cohabiting relationships? What factors influence changes in couples' satisfaction over time? In a recent cross-sectional study, we found that trait emotional intelligence (EI) and conflict communication patterns predicted the relationship satisfaction of cohabiting couples (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008). The aim of this study was to extend that research by examining whether and to what degree EI and communication patterns were associated with changes in relationship satisfaction over a 12-month period.

1.1. Emotional intelligence

EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) is a personality trait that entails self-perceived emotion-related abilities and dispositions that are typically measured via self-report instruments (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). The construct has been argued to capture individual differences in affective self-evaluations and is said to integrate the emotion-related facets of the Giant Three and Big Five personality taxonomies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). The construct validity of EI has been supported through a program of research that has systematically demonstrated its discriminant, criterion and incremental validity (e.g. see Kluemper, 2008; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007).

To date, however, few studies have examined the longitudinal effects of EI. Given that EI is conceptualised as a personality trait, it is assumed to be relatively stable over time like other personality traits (Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007). Personality traits have been shown to have high levels of stability across time (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). In looking at this type of stability, an individual's relative position in the sample is retained over time, and the stability is generally measured by correlation (Caspi & Roberts, 2001).

1.2. Emotional intelligence and relationship satisfaction

While EI would seem to have obvious conceptual relevance to couples, few studies have examined the connections between EI and relationship satisfaction. EI has correlated with relationship satisfaction in cohabiting couples (Smith et al., 2008), but the longitudinal connections between EI and relationship satisfaction are unknown. Research in EI-related personality domains, however, may indicate possible relationships. For instance, when looking at the effects of personality on changes in relationship satisfaction, neuroticism (or trait anxiety) has received the most attention (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Longitudinal studies have found that while neuroticism predicted initial levels of dissatisfaction in newlyweds, it was not associated with changes in satisfaction (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Thus, it has been argued that personality creates the stable intrapersonal context of marriage and that its effect is constant over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). One aim of the present study is to examine whether EI has a constant and beneficial effect on relationship

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satisfaction over time, or whether it predicts changes in relationship satisfaction.

1.3. Communication and satisfaction

When it comes to longitudinal studies of romantic relationships, couples' problem-solving behaviours have often been of interest (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). There is clear cross-sectional evidence that constructive communication patterns are associated with satisfaction, while more dysfunctional patterns, such as the demand-withdraw pattern and mutual avoidance and withholding, are associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Noller & White, 1990). The longitudinal connections between communication and satisfaction have also been examined. For instance, constructive communication has predicted improvements in satisfaction (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999), whereas a pattern of avoidance has predicted declines in satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), and the demand-withdraw pattern of communication has predicted declines in satisfaction and divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

1.4. Emotional intelligence, communication patterns and satisfaction

In theorizing about marital development, Karney and Bradbury (1995) have argued that personality forms part of the intrapersonal environment of marital relationships. The effect of this environment on marital stability and satisfaction is theorised to be realized early in the marriage and thereafter is constant over time. Interpersonal processes such as communication, however, develop with the marriage and tend to be related to changes in satisfaction. Karney and Bradbury (1997) tested their theory by examining the associations between neuroticism, marital interaction and satisfaction in newlyweds over four-years. They found that while neuroticism predicted satisfaction at each of the eight time waves, it did not predict changes in satisfaction. However, couples' marital interaction predicted changes in satisfaction over the four-year period. They concluded that neuroticism is more strongly associated with spouses' initial levels of satisfaction, whereas marital interaction is more strongly associated with changes in satisfaction over time.

1.5. Aims and rationale

The aim of this study was to examine the longitudinal influences of EI, conflict communication patterns and relationship satisfaction in cohabiting couples over a 12-month period. To date, no study has examined these relationships longitudinally. First, following from Karney and Bradbury's (1997) study on neuroticism and satisfaction it is hypothesised that the effect of self-reported EI on satisfaction will be stable and that self-reported EI will not be associated with changes in satisfaction over time (H1). Second, following from Karney and Bradbury (1997) and the literature on communication patterns, it is anticipated that reports of the Time 1 communication patterns will predict Time 2 satisfaction. Specifically, it is expected that Time 1 constructive communication will predict increases in Time 2 satisfaction (H2) (Gill et al., 1999), while Time 1 reports of demanding and withdrawing (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) (H3) or avoidance and withholding (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) (H4) will predict decreases in Time 2 satisfaction.

1.6. Plan of analysis

A number of different statistical analyses will be conducted in order to test the hypotheses. We will begin with correlational analyses by sex, followed by structural equation modelling (SEM). One advantage of SEM is that it allows both individuals' data to be analysed together so as to ascertain both actor and partner effects. Actor effects measure the effects of an individual's predictor variable on their own outcome variable (e.g. the effects of men's Time 1 self-rated EI on men's Time 2 satisfaction) and partner effects measure the effect of the individual's predictor variable on their partner's outcome variable (e.g. the effects of women's Time 1 self-rated EI on men's Time 2 satisfaction). The other advantage of SEM is that it controls for dyadic dependence or correlation (e.g. men's and women's satisfaction scores are likely to be correlated) and autocorrelation (the correlation between measurements of a variable at two points in time), which, if not controlled, can bias tests of significance and degrees of freedom (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

To test Hypothesis 1, that the effect of self-reported EI on satisfaction will be constant, first, correlations for each sex between Time 1 self-reported EI and Time 2 satisfaction will be derived, followed by correlations between Time 2 self-reported EI (controlling for Time 1 satisfaction) and Time 2 satisfaction. If the correlations are significant, SEM will be used to test whether the effect of self-rated EI on satisfaction, on average, is stable across time. In order to test Hypotheses 2–4 regarding the conflict communication patterns as predictors of changes in satisfaction, first, for each sex, Time 1 reports of the communication patterns will be correlated with Time 2 satisfaction (controlling for Time 1 satisfaction). If these correlations are significant, the communication patterns will then be tested with SEM to determine whether, on average, people with low EI or who report more dysfunctional communication patterns show greater decreases in relationship satisfaction compared to those with high EI or more functional communication patterns, and the same baseline levels of satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Using convenience sampling, 82 heterosexual cohabiting couples were recruited. Participants resided in the Sydney-Wollongong region of New South Wales, and were predominantly middle class. 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.

In relation to the original sample of 82 couples, 37 couples (45%) did not participate at Time 2. Thus, 90 participants or 45 couples completed the full longitudinal study. Of the 37 couples who did not participate in the second study, three couples were unable to be contacted, two couples declined to participate, while non-participation by the remaining couples was unexplained. Couples were contacted by mail and 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 (Petrides & Furnham, 2006) is a 30-item self-re-

port scale that yields a global measure of EI, and is based on 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). Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study was .91.

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 this study was .85. The female demand and man withdraw subscale contains three items as does the man demand and female withdraw subscale. The alpha coefficients were .85 (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 .74.

Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory: The PRQC (Fletcher et al., 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 .88.

3. Results

Given that 37 couples (45%) from the initial sample did not participate at Time 2, the means for both samples were analysed to establish if there were differences in satisfaction at Time 1 between those who participated at Time 2 and those who did not. An independent samples *t*-test indicated there was no difference ($t(79) = 1.12$, $p > .05$) between the Time 1 mean satisfaction scores for men who did not participate at Time 2 ($M = 19.17$, SD = 2.82, $n = 36$) versus those who did ($M = 18.40$, SD = 3.24, $n = 45$). Similarly, there was no significant difference for women ($t(68.49) = 1.94$, $p > .05$) in the mean satisfaction scores at Time 1 for the women who did not participate at Time 2 ($M = 19.35$, SD = 1.93, $n = 37$) versus those who did ($M = 18.11$, SD = 3.73, $n = 45$).

3.1. Mean differences

Table 1 presents the mean scores and differences for men's and women's variables at Times 1 and 2. Paired samples *t*-tests indicated significant differences on both men's and women's avoidance and withholding, both indicating reports of more avoidance and withholding at Time 2. These results suggest that, excepting the avoidance and withholding pattern of communication, the variables were stable at the group level. Paired samples *t*-tests also indicated a significant difference between men's and women's reports of avoidance and withholding at Time 1 ($t(43) = 2.19$, $p < .05$), with women reporting more avoidance and withholding than men. This suggests a difference in reporting, rather than behaviour, as both individuals reported on the couples' patterns.

Table 1
Differences between Times 1 and 2 scores for men and women on EI, perceptions of the communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction

Scales	Time 1		Time 2		df	*t*	*p*
	M	SD	*M*	SD			
Self-reported EI							
Males	153.77	19.88	154.16	20.05	43	−21	.83
Females	151.27	21.86	151.98	20.66	44	−.32	.75
Constructive communication							
Male reports	50.86	6.99	49.88	8.02	41	.92	.36
Female reports	50.74	9.27	50.19	7.98	42	.47	.64
Man demand/woman withdraw							
Male reports	10.09	5.15	9.81	4.97	42	.42	.68
Females reports	9.91	5.95	10.24	5.50	44	−.40	.69
Woman demand/man withdraw							
Male reports	11.91	5.65	11.00	5.75	42	1.25	.22
Female reports	12.89	6.50	11.60	6.25	44	1.86	.07
Avoidance and withholding							
Male reports	5.26	2.82	9.23	3.98	41	−6.43	.00
Female reports	6.89	4.39	9.75	5.54	43	−3.60	.00
Satisfaction							
Male reports	18.40	3.24	18.89	2.57	44	−1.32	.19
Female reports	18.05	3.75	18.09	3.44	43	−.09	.93

However, there were no other sex differences on any of the variables at Times 1 or 2.

3.2. Stability correlations

We next explored the stability of the variables across Times 1 and 2. Examination of all zero-order and partial correlations (statistically controlling for length of cohabitation and for age) between Times 1 and 2 scores for men and women on EI, communication patterns, and satisfaction were statistically significant (ranging from $r = .46$ to $r = .82$) at $p < .01$, except male reports of avoidance and withholding which were significant ($r = .34$) at $p < .05$. This suggests that the variables were relatively stable across the 12-months. Furthermore, controlling for length of cohabitation and age did not result in appreciable changes to the correlations.

3.3. Correlations at each time wave and across the two waves

Table 2 presents the correlations between men's and women's self-reported EI, communication patterns and relationship satisfaction at Times 1 and 2 (see the first four columns). There were moderate correlations at Times 1 and 2, for both men and women, with few cross-correlations between the sexes. In relation to Hypothesis 1, there was cross-sectional support for the prediction that the effect of self-rated EI on satisfaction would be stable at Time 1 and Time 2. Notably, men's self-rated EI was correlated with concurrent satisfaction at Times 1 and 2, and women's self-rated EI was correlated with satisfaction at Time 2, but not at Time 1 although it approached significance ($r = .27$, $n = 45$, $p = .07$). The longitudinal test of the stable effect of self-rated EI is presented in the next section.

Table 2 also presents the correlations for men and women between Time 1 self-reported EI, the communication patterns and Time 2 satisfaction, controlling for Time 1 satisfaction (see the last two columns). When it came to assessing changes over time, the only significant correlations were between women's Time 1 reports of avoidance and withholding communication and both men's and women's Time 2 satisfaction.

3.4. Assessing the stable effect of self-rated EI on satisfaction

Given that self-rated EI was associated with satisfaction cross-sectionally at both times, we needed to test if the influence of

Table 2
Correlations for men's and women's self-reported EI, communication patterns and satisfaction, at Time 1, at Time 2, and (controlling for Time 1 satisfaction) between Time 1 and Time 2

Scales	Time 1 variables and Time 1 satisfaction		Time 2 variables and Time 2 satisfaction		Time 1 variables and Time 2 satisfaction	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Self-rated EI						
Male reports	.40**	.12	.36*	.18	.09	.06
Female reports	.19	.27	.33*	.48**	.21	.07
Perceptions of constructive communication						
Male reports	.49**	.20	.56**	.24	.19	−.08
Female reports	.28	.43**	.53**	.31*	.22	.24
Perceptions of man demand/woman withdraw						
Male reports	−.12	−.14	−.34*	−.17	−.11	−.13
Female reports	−.20	−.21	−.38*	−.23	−.20	−.03
Perceptions of woman demand/man withdraw						
Male reports	−.23	−.25	−.45**	−.28	−.05	−.13
Female reports	−.22	−.20	−.29	−.32*	−.18	−.22
Perceptions of avoidance and withholding						
Male reports	−.51**	−.24	−.38*	−.08	−.15	−.02
Female reports	−.30*	−.30*	−.32*	−.28	−.31*	−.43**

$n = 40$.
* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

self-rated EI was stable across the 12-month period. We ran a series of analyses using SEM to test whether the effect of self-rated EI on satisfaction, on average, was stable across time. When testing the model, certain paths were assumed to be the same or equal. In order to test this assumption, χ^2 was used to measure goodness of fit. When χ^2 is non-significant, the result indicates that the assumption of equality does not reduce the fit of the model. It must be noted, that Chi square follows an asymptotic distribution and is more likely to be significant in a large sample, which is a limitation of this statistic.

When we tested the synchronous and cross-lagged effect of men's and women's self-rated EI, we assumed that the paths were equal, and this did not reduce the fit of the model ($\chi^2(2) = .1$, $p > .05$). There were significant actor effects ($\beta = .032$, SE = .014, $n = 44$, $t = 2.25$, $p < .05$) but there were no partner effects. (The standardized coefficients are presented in Fig. 1; see paths a for the actor effects and paths b for partner effects.) These results indicated that an individual's self-rated EI had a stable or constant effect on their satisfaction over the 12-month period, which supports Hypothesis 1.

3.5. Predicting changes in satisfaction

We ran a further series of analyses using SEM to ascertain which Time 1 variables predicted changes in Time 2 satisfaction. These analyses test whether, on average, people with low EI or who report more dysfunctional communication patterns show greater decreases in relationship satisfaction compared to those with high EI or more functional communication patterns, and the same baseline levels of satisfaction. We estimated the cross-lagged regression model for actor and partner effects, and we tested equality constraints for all paths in the model.

In the final model, as illustrated in Fig. 2, we assumed equal paths for all effects, and this did not significantly drop the fit of the model ($\chi^2(3, n = 45) = 6$, $p > .05$). The results indicated that women's Time 1 reports of avoidance and withholding communication predicted declines in both men's and women's Time 2 reports of satisfaction ($\beta = -.151$, SE = .016, $t = -2.47$, $p < .05$) (path a) (an actor and partner effect). (The standardized coefficients are presented in Fig. 2.) This finding supports Hypothesis 4, although Hypotheses 2 and 3 regarding constructive communication and demand-withdraw communication were not supported. Unexpectedly, in the final model, for individuals who reported high satisfaction at Time 1, their scores predicted declines in their partners' satisfaction at Time 2 ($\beta = -.174$, SE = .069, $t = -2.52$, $p < .05$) (path b) (a partner effect). Finally, as theoretically expected, an individual's satisfaction at Time 1 predicted their satisfaction at Time 2 ($\beta = -.553$, SE = .074, $t = 7.50$, $p < .01$) (path c) (an actor effect).

4. Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the longitudinal influences of EI, conflict communication patterns and relationship sat-

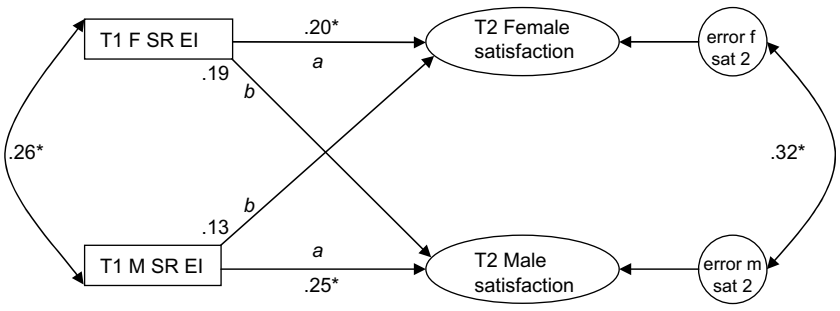

Fig. 1. Standardized parameter estimates for the final model predicting the stable effect of Time 1 self-rated EI on Time 2 satisfaction. *Significant coefficients.

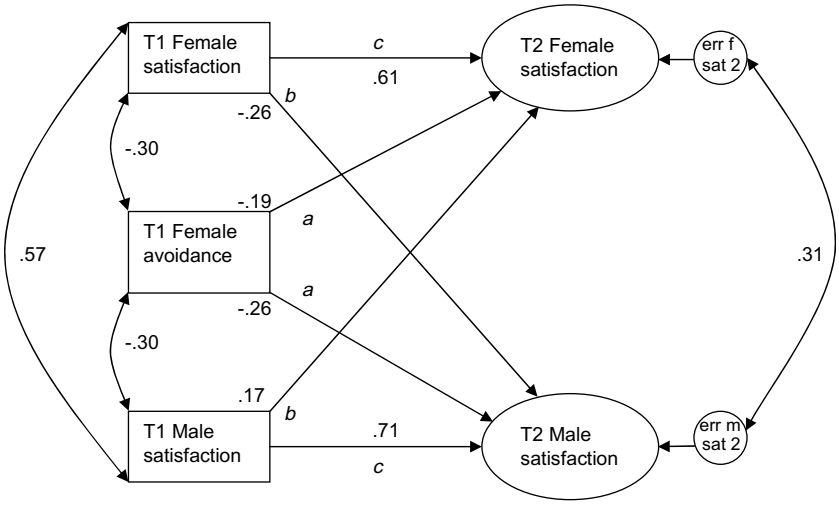

Fig. 2. Standardized parameter estimates for the final model predicting changes in Time 2 satisfaction. *All coefficients are significant.

isfaction in cohabiting couples over a 12-month period. We found that the effect of an individual's self-rated EI on their own satisfaction was stable over the 12-month period and was not related to changes in satisfaction. In contrast, women's reports of the avoidance and withholding pattern of communication predicted declines in both men's and women's satisfaction at Time 2. These results suggest the different contributions of self-rated EI and communication patterns to relationship satisfaction over time.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the effect of an individual's self-reported EI on their own satisfaction was stable longitudinally, and was not associated with changes in satisfaction. There was no evidence for partner effects suggesting that it is an individual's own personality that contributes to their satisfaction. These findings also support research that has found that personality has a stable effect on satisfaction and is not associated with changes in satisfaction over time (Caughlin et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

One unexpected finding was that individuals who reported greater satisfaction at Time 1 had partners who reported declines in satisfaction at Time 2. There is no theoretical reason to expect this effect, and it may have occurred by chance. However, this is a one-year snap shot of satisfaction, and as satisfaction is known to fluctuate over time (Bradbury & Karney, 2004), it may be the case that examining satisfaction over a longer period of time would provide a clearer picture of the changes in satisfaction. What was clear from the final model, was that the strongest predictor of an individual's Time 2 satisfaction was their Time 1 satisfaction, and this is consistent with current evidence and theory (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

In relation to the conflict communication patterns, women's reports of avoidance and withholding communication predicted decreases in their own and their partner's satisfaction. This supports Karney and Bradbury's (1997) finding that interaction processes, such as communication, are associated with changes in satisfaction over time. However, it is often the demand-withdraw pattern of communication that has demonstrated the strongest effects in relation to satisfaction and divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). We speculate here that avoidance may be more significant in long-term cohabiting couples like those in our sample (Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998; Smith et al., 2008). Consistent with this view, Gottman and Krokoff (1989), in a sample of couples in long-term marriages ($M = 23$ years married), found that avoidance predicted dissatisfaction over time, but not cross-sectionally. The researchers argued that partners who avoid discussion of problems are at some risk over time because they are not able to develop a sense of working through their problems together.

Interestingly, women's reports of an avoidant pattern had an important impact on their own satisfaction as well as partner satisfaction, whereas men's reports of the avoidant pattern had no effect. There is evidence that women tend to be the initiators of problem-solving discussions (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995) and that men tend to avoid and withdraw more than women (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). It may be that if women avoid discussion of relationship problems, then issues are unlikely to be discussed and resolved. This would explain the resulting declines in satisfaction for both partners and underlines the importance of the woman's role in couples' communication over time.

4.1. Limitations and conclusions

This study is not without its limitations. First, self-report instruments were employed to measure both EI and the conflict communication patterns. While data were collected from both partners, which should reduce possible distortions regarding the relationships in question, it is possible that similar negative or positive biases may have occurred in both sets of ratings. Secondly, the sample was drawn from acquaintances of the researchers and probably overrepresented middle class participants. Thirdly, the small sample size meant that there was limited statistical power and the analyses may not have detected small to medium-sized effects. Finally, the ranges in age and length of cohabitation of the participants, although statistically controlled for in the initial correlational analyses, may have affected the generalizability of the results.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there were some interesting results. Self-reported EI had a stable effect on satisfaction across the 12-month period, and it was not predictive of changes in satisfaction. Instead, women's reports of avoidance and withholding communication predicted decreases in satisfaction over the 12-month period for both partners. This finding underlines the corrosive effects of moderate to high levels of avoidance, and also suggests the importance of the woman's role in couples' communication.

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