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

Danielle M. Young [a,*], Corinne A. Moss-Racusin [b], Diana T. Sanchez [a]

[a] Rutgers University, USA
[b] Skidmore College, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 53 Avenue E, Tillett Hall 625, Piscataway, NJ 08854-8040, USA.

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

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

Implicit perspectives

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

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

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

Perceptual congruence in close relationships

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

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

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

The current study

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

Methods

Participants and procedure

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

racially and ethnically diverse, with 50.9% identified as White, 28.3% identified as Asian, 7.5% identified as Hispanic, 5.9% identified as Black, 3.4% identified as multiracial, 3.1% identified as other, 0.3% (one individual) identified as Native American, and 32.9% of the couples indicating different racial identifications. Relationship partners came into the laboratory together and completed identical measures in separate rooms. Before beginning the study, participants received the following instructions, "We will be asking you several questions about your relationship with your partner," followed immediately by an agentic–communal trait IAT (see Measures for details). The implicit task was followed by several explicit measures presented in a random order. The reported measures are a subset of questions collected in this larger questionnaire.[1]

Measures

Implicit traits

Implicit agency and communality traits were measured using a self–partner agency–communality IAT that was modified from the gender stereotype IAT (Rudman et al., 2001). In this modified gender stereotype IAT (Rudman et al., 2001), instead of associating agentic (masculine stereotype) and communal (feminine stereotype) words with the generic categories of male and female, participants were asked to categorize agentic words (*power, strong, confident, dominant, command, assert,* and *powerful*) or communal words (*warmth, nice, love, caring, gentle, kind,* and *warm*) with either the self (*I, me, mine, my* and *self*) or their partner (*partner, lover, sweetheart, mate,* and *beloved*). Generic terms have been successfully used in previous research to elicit implicit partner associations (Slotter et al., 2012). The IAT effects, or *D* scores (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003), were computed such that positive IAT effects indicate an implicit association between self and agency (and partner and communal), and negative IAT effects indicate an implicit association between self and communal (and partner and agentic).

Explicit traits

Explicit self-reports of agentic and communal traits were obtained using the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Helmreich, Spence, & Wilhelm, 1981). The communality and agency subscales are each composed of eight pairs of characteristics rated on a 5-point scale. Agentic trait pairs include "not at all self-confident/self-confident," "very submissive/very dominant," and "very passive/very active," $\alpha = .74$. Communal trait pairs include "very cold in relations with others/very warm in relations with others," "very rough/very gentle," and "not at all kind/very kind," $\alpha = .73$.

Relationship health

Relationship health was measured by combining items from three separate scales to create a 25-item composite measure averaging 25 items. These items include seven items from Hendrick's relationship satisfaction scale (Hendrick, 1988), and 18 items (the 7-item emotional trust and the 11-item dependability subscales) from the Measures of Specific Interpersonal Trust (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). These

three scales were significantly correlated ($rs = .59–.64$), and preliminary analyses on the individual scales yielded the same significant pattern of results as those reported in this manuscript (see Supplemental Table 2 for details). A confirmatory factor analysis was run on the latent construct of relationship health, and fit of the model was good, RMSEA = 0.04 (0.03, 0.05); CFI = 0.98; NNMI = 0.96, thus the items were combined into a single scale. All items were rated from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more relationship health ($\alpha = .91$). Sample items include, "In general, how satisfied are you in your relationship," "I could talk freely to my partner and know that he/she would want to listen," and "I could expect my partner to tell me the truth."

Results

Preliminary analyses

In keeping with gender stereotypes, men explicitly (as assessed by PAQ scores) viewed themselves as more agentic ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.57$) than women did ($M = 3.38, SD = 0.53$), $t(320) = 6.63, p < .001, d = .74$. Similarly, women explicitly viewed themselves as more communal ($M = 4.13, SD = 0.48$) than men did, ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.50$), $t(320) = -2.97, p = .003, d = .33$. Despite these gender differences, both men and women saw themselves as more communal than agentic, $t(160) = -3.28 \ p = .001, d = .34$ and $t(160) = -13.43, p < .001, d = 1.48$, respectively. Implicitly (as assessed by the IAT), men associated themselves with agency more so than communality, ($M = 0.16, SD = 0.32$), $t(160) = 6.12, p < .001, d = 0.98$, while women associated themselves equally with agency and communality ($M = 0.02, SD = 0.30$), $t(161) = 0.52, p = .6, d = 0.1$.

As expected based on low correlations between implicit and explicit measures in close relationship research (Greenwald et al., 2009), an individual's implicit agentic–communal trait score was not associated with either their own explicit measures of agency, $r = -.08, p = .15$, communality, $r = -.07, p = .21$, or their partner's explicit measures, $r = -.06, p = .30$, and $r = .04, p = .49$, respectively. Across all couples, implicit agentic–communal traits were marginally negatively correlated, $r = -.13, p = .09$, such that couples' views of their relationship trended towards perceptual congruence (if an individual saw themselves as implicitly more agentic, their partner saw themselves as implicitly more communal). However, perceptual congruence does not address the complementarity of these traits within couples. Further inspection revealed that couples were generally split between complementary (one agentic partner, one communal partner) and non-complementary pairings. Specifically, 35% of couples were traditional complementary (i.e., the male implicitly viewed himself as agentic and the female implicitly viewed herself as communal), 17% were non-traditional complementary (i.e., the male implicitly viewed himself as communal and the female implicitly viewed herself as agentic), 33% were agentic non-complementary (i.e., both the male and female implicitly viewed themselves as the more agentic partner), and 15% were communal non-complementary (i.e., both partners implicitly viewed themselves as the more communal partner); see Supplemental Table 1 for more details.

Data analysis strategy

The majority of the research on agency and communality traits investigates dyadic relationships on an individual, rather than a couple, level (for an exception, see Sanchez, Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Good, 2012). Individual-level analysis does not explore how an individual's traits simultaneously influence their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction. Thus, it is unknown how an individual's explicit or implicit self-concept influences both their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction. For example, it is possible that an individual's

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[1] With the exception of items from the relationship satisfaction scale, this paper presents results from unique measures obtained by Sanchez, Phelan, Moss-Racusin, and Good (2012). The analyses in this paper were not previously reported. Due to difficulty of obtaining dyadic data, several other measures not relevant to the current study were collected during this session. These additional measures not reported in this manuscript or Sanchez et al. (2012) measured general implicit gender-stereotypes (Rudman et al., 2001), personal views and beliefs (i.e. the ambivalent sexism inventory, feminist identification), relationship communication and styles (i.e. attachment styles, conflict styles), and intergroup and intragroup attitudes (i.e. group trust).

communal self-concept improves only their own relationship satisfaction, only their partner's, or both.

To remedy this, we examined the effect of the explicit agentic and communal traits, implicit agentic–communal traits, and perceptual congruence of these implicit traits on relationship health using the multi-level model approach to the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM is a model of dyadic interdependence that accounts for the non-independence of two individuals, in this case a romantic couple. We employed the APIM to examine each participant's reported relationship health as predicted by his or her explicit and implicit agency and communality traits (actor effects), and his or her partner's explicit and implicit traits (partner effects). APIM also enables an investigation of how partner's traits may interact, allowing for exploration of the influence of perceptual congruence represented by the interaction between actor and partner implicit scores (termed actor–partner moderator effects, APME; Cook & Kenny, 2005). The term "actor effect" refers to the effect of one's own traits (e.g., "my communality") on one's own relationship health ("my relationship health"), while the term "partner effect" refers to the effect of one's partner's traits (e.g., "my partner's communality") on the actor's relationship health ("my relationship health"). We also controlled for the respondent's age and the length of relationship in months (see Table 1). Because the explicit measures were personal self-reports that did not incorporate a representation of both actor and partner, an explicit interaction term was not included in the analysis. Significant interactions were probed using the guidelines set forth in Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006).

Gender interactions

In a second analysis, we added all 3-way and lower order interactions between gender and explicit agentic and communal traits, implicit agency–communality traits, and perceptual congruence. This allowed for the examination of three questions: 1) whether the effects depend on whether the male or female partner is the "actor"; 2) if effects were different for traditional versus non-traditional pairings; and 3) if there were differential effects of perceptual congruence for men and women. If males or females have different expectations for their

partner's implicit gender scores, for instance if men with agentic female partners are less satisfied in their relationships, but women with agentic male partners are quite satisfied, we would expect to see respondent's gender moderate the relationship between partner IAT scores and relationship health. If traditional or non-traditional trait patterns influence relationship health, we would expect to see gender moderate the interactive effect of actor and partner IAT scores on relationship health. Thus, we added interactions between actor gender and IAT score, actor gender and partner IAT score, and the interaction between actor gender, actor IAT score and partner IAT score to the original model (see Table 1, Model 2). Adding gender interactions to the model produced no new significant interactions ($ps > .1$), and adding the interaction terms did not significantly alter results. Because this second model produced no significant gender interactions, the results reported below focus on the first model.

APIM results

Covariate effects

There were no significant effects of either actor age or relationship length. There was, however, a significant effect of gender such that female partners reported higher relationship satisfaction than their male partners.

Explicit traits

As expected, explicitly viewing oneself as communal was significantly positively associated with an individual's relationship health, as indicated by a positive main effect of actor's explicit communal trait (see Table 1, Model 1). Similarly, having a romantic partner who explicitly viewed themselves as communal (partner explicit communal effect) was associated with increased relationship health, as indicated by positive main effect of partner's explicit communal trait. There were no significant main effects for explicit agency.

Implicit traits

Having a romantic partner who implicitly viewed themselves as the more agentic member of the couple was associated with poorer relationship health, as indicated by a significant negative main effect of partner IAT. The main effect of actor IAT score did not significantly predict relationship health, suggesting that implicitly viewing oneself as the more agentic partner, in and of itself, was unrelated to an individual's relationship outcomes.

Perceptual congruence

Of more importance, the expected significant interaction was found between actor and partners' IAT scores for relationship health. Simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991; Preacher et al., 2006) demonstrated that as both partners' implicit belief that they were the more agentic partner increased, relationship health decreased ($b = -0.42$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .03$) in comparison to couples with perceptual congruence about implicit gender traits, including those who saw both partners as equally communal and agentic, $ps > .20$ (see Fig. 1). Furthermore, couples who both saw themselves as the more communal partner had similar relationship outcomes to couples with implicit gender role perceptual congruence ($p = .30$). In other words, only implicit disagreement (poor perceptual congruence) regarding the shared implicit perception of the agentic trait was detrimental to relationships.

Discussion

This study served as the first investigation of implicit agentic and communal traits, as well as their link to couples' relationship well-

Table 1
Summary table of APIM results on actor's relationship health.

Source	Model 1				Model 2 (with gender interactions)			
	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Intercept	2.26	0.66	3.44	.00	2.31	0.68	3.42	.00
Actor explicit agency	0.12	0.07	1.81	.07	0.12	0.07	1.75	.08
Partner explicit agency	0.01	0.07	0.10	.92	0.01	0.07	0.17	.87
Actor explicit communal	0.43	0.07	5.87	.00	0.43	0.08	5.58	.00
Partner explicit communal	0.29	0.07	3.95	.00	0.29	0.08	3.77	.00
Actor ACT	−0.11	0.13	−0.90	.37	−0.13	0.13	−0.97	.33
Partner ACT	−0.39	0.12	−3.19	.00	−0.42	0.13	−3.10	.00
Actor ACT * partner ACT	−1.12	0.40	−2.81	.01	−1.08	0.43	−2.50	.01
Actor explicit agency * gender	–	–	–	–	−0.03	0.07	−0.45	.65
Partner explicit agency * gender	–	–	–	–	0.03	0.07	0.45	.65
Actor explicit communal * gender	–	–	–	–	−0.01	0.08	−0.08	.94
Partner explicit communal * gender	–	–	–	–	−0.03	0.08	−0.32	.75
Actor ACT * gender	–	–	–	–	−0.07	0.12	−0.55	.58
Partner ACT * gender	–	–	–	–	−0.06	0.13	−0.49	.63
Actor ACT * partner ACT * gender	–	–	–	–	0.06	0.29	0.20	.84
Actor gender	−0.08	0.04	−2.30	.02	0.06	0.42	0.14	.89
Actor age	0.02	0.01	1.54	.12	0.02	0.01	1.41	.16
Relationship length	0.00	0.00	−1.23	.22	0.00	0.00	−1.27	.21

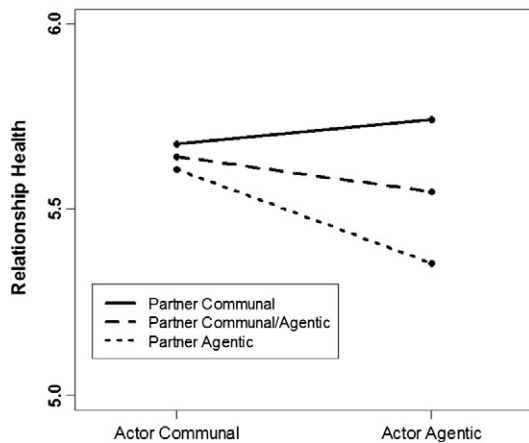*Note*: ACT = Agentic–communal trait IAT.

Fig. 1. Interaction between actor IAT and partner IAT scores on individual's (actor) relationship health. Note: "Partner communal" indicates that one's partner had a greater implicit association with the self with communality and the partner with agency. "Partner communal/agentic" indicates that one's partner viewed self and partner equally with agency and communality. "Partner agentic" indicates that one's partner had a greater implicit association with the self and agency and the partner with communality.

being. The implicit agency–communality IAT captured distinct and important information in addition to explicit trait measures. Though explicit agentic and communal trait measures are part of a strong literature on gendered traits and relationship health, this is the first study to use an implicit trait measure. While both men and women explicitly self-identified more with communal than agentic traits, men implicitly saw themselves as more agentic in the context of their relationship. Women, on the other hand, tended to implicitly see themselves and their partners as equally agentic and communal. In keeping with the generally low levels of correspondence evinced in previous research (Greenwald et al., 2009), implicit and explicit measures were not correlated and predicted unique variance in relationship health, lending further support to the importance of exploring the role of both explicit and implicit agency and communality in relationship health.

As expected based on previous research (LeBel & Campbell, 2013; McNulty et al., 2013), implicit and explicit measures provided different insights into the relationship between agency, communality, and relationship health. In keeping with previous research, explicitly identifying as communal was positively related to relationship health (Ickes, 1993). Furthermore, both actor and partner explicitly identifying as communal was positively related to an individual's relationship health. This suggests that an individual's relationship health can benefit jointly and separately from their personal warmth, as well as their partner's warmth.

For implicit traits, a different pattern emerged. As the partner identified as relatively more agentic than the individual (partner IAT effect), the individual's relationship health decreased. However, this relationship is qualified by a couple's perceptual congruence about their agentic and communal traits. Both partners' self-reporting as communal was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), as was perceptual congruence of implicit agentic–communal traits (Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). In couples where both members implicitly identified as more agentic than their partner, however, relationship health decreased. This suggests that a lack of perceptual congruence, not just partner's agentic traits, may be what reduces relationship health. Both explicit and implicit communal traits—regardless of the gender of the individual enacting them—are powerful predictors of relationship health.

This study also added to past evidence that, contrary to lay beliefs, adherence to traditional gendered traits of agency and communality in and of itself does not relate to greater relationship health. Indeed, this work suggests that implicit perceptual congruence is related to positive relationship outcomes for both traditional and non-traditional couples.

Despite the fact that men were more likely to implicitly associate themselves with agency (whereas women associated themselves equally with agency and communality) than communality, no significant interactions between gender and perceptual congruence emerged. That is, both traditional and non-traditional couples who implicitly agreed about their agentic and communal traits experienced equally positive relationship health. These findings suggest that couples' implicit perception that their relationship deviates from traditional gender norms does not have negative costs for their relationships. Instead, it is implicit perceptual congruence about who is associated with each of these gendered prescriptions that is important for relationship health.

Limitations and future directions

Though the IAT allowed us to measure the relative association of oneself in the context of a couple, it does leave open the question of whether self, actual partner, ideal partner, or relative trait perceptions are driving the IAT score. The inability to trace if a specific association (the self with agentic or the partner with communal) is driving an IAT effect is a general weakness of the standard IAT, however in the current study it may have afforded assessment of self–other associations in the context of a romantic relationship. The relative nature of the implicit measure was also not reflected in the explicit measures. That is, the explicit measures captured a view of oneself, while the IAT captured a view of oneself in relationship to another. Since the implicit and explicit measures are not completely parallel, this may contribute to the lack of correspondence between the measures. Future research should incorporate both personal and relative explicit measures.

Another potential limitation with the specific IAT used is that generic terms were used for partner, and it is possible that participants were responding in reference to their ideal, not their actual partner. Though generic partner terms have demonstrated predictive validity in previous research (Slotter et al., 2012) and participants were instructed to respond to questions about their relationship and their partner, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that the IAT score reflected their ideal, as opposed to current, relationship. In this case, the interplay between a couple's implicit trait scores could be interpreted as general, as opposed to perceptual, congruence, and the current results might reflect the relationship between the congruence of ideal relationship traits and relationship health. Future research should use both generic and partner specific implicit measures to determine if, indeed, these implicit measures capture similar associations.

Finally, the relationship health measure, comprised of trust, dependability, and relationship satisfaction scales, may be more closely tied to communal than agentic traits. Indeed, past research on relationship satisfaction suggests that communal, not agentic traits, predict better outcomes (Ickes, 1993). Future research should incorporate desirable relationship outcomes that may hold high value for agentic partners, to see whether perceptual congruence has similar effects for other relationship outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study are novel for several reasons. First, this study establishes that implicit measures, specifically the IAT, are useful in exploring shared realities in close relationships. The IAT and its iterations (i.e., the Brief IAT) are highly flexible and can be modified to test the influence of agreement between any number of implicit relationship cognitions. Future research should extend this work by exploring how implicit shared realities can influence a range of interpersonal outcomes, including relationship formation and dissolution. Second, by emphasizing the importance of dyadic perceptual congruence of implicit agency and communality, this study suggests a possible solution to the disconnect between lay theories about gender complementarity and the impact of agency and communality on relationship health. Perhaps what lay theorists view as a connection between adhering to traditional traits and relationship health is simply a result of perceptual congruence. Third, though previous research has separately investigated perceptual congruence and

agency and communality in relationships, no study to our knowledge has traced the links between members of a couple's implicit perceptions of their agency and communality and the health of their romantic relationships. Exploring the implicit shared realities of a couple's gendered dynamics illuminates the boundaries of when congruence is—and is not—important in romantic relationships. Perceptual congruence about relative gendered traits had universally positive implications for relationship outcomes in this study; whether these patterns were traditional or non-traditional did not. Research is also needed to understand if implicit shared realities impact just romantic relationships, or if there are broader implications for all interpersonal interactions.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.06.010.

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