

Self-Determination and Conflict in Romantic Relationships

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Four studies examined associations between E. L. Deci and R. M. Ryan's (1985, 2000) construct of autonomy, responses to relationship disagreements, and dissatisfaction after conflict. In Study 1, diary data showed that trait autonomy predicted relationship autonomy, which in turn predicted relative satisfaction after disagreements. In Study 2, trait autonomy predicted relationship autonomy, which was associated with less defensive and more understanding responses to conflict. Studies 3 and 4 examined whether one's partner's relationship autonomy uniquely predicted reported and observed behavior during conflict. Autonomous reasons for being in the relationship (of both self and partner) predicted both reported and observed responses to conflict and feelings of satisfaction.

Keywords: autonomy, self-determination, relationships, motivation, conflict

To be self-determined means to be relatively self-governing in one's behavior—that one's actions are autonomous, freely chosen, and fully endorsed by the self rather than coerced or pressured (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Autonomy in romantic relationships refers to fully endorsing one's own involvement in the relationship, rather than feeling coerced, guilty, or not knowing why one is involved in the relationship. Autonomy in romantic relationships has been characterized elsewhere as growth motivation, or the tendency to approach relationship challenges as opportunities for improving the relationship rather than indications of a bad investment (Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002). In this way, personally endorsing and feeling authentically invested in one's relationship may allow an individual to be more understanding and less defensive in the presence of conflict (Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

According to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002), people have an innate psychological need to feel autonomous, which carries over to a variety of interpersonal contexts. It is important to note that Deci and Ryan's

construct of autonomy is not akin to notions of autonomy as independence, detachment, avoidance, or rebelliousness (cf. Murray, 1938). To the contrary, Deci and Ryan's construct of autonomy reflects a deep personal endorsement of one's actions and involvement with others and is associated with better personal and social adjustment (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996; Koestner & Losier, 1996; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996).

Autonomy, or feeling fully aware of and uncoerced in one's actions, has been linked to better personal and social well-being. For example, not only do more autonomous individuals (at the trait level) tend to have better well-being, but daily fluctuations in autonomy also uniquely predict daily well-being (Reis et al., 2000; Sheldon et al., 1996). Thus, trait autonomy as well as daily fluctuations in feelings of autonomy are associated with better well-being. Feelings of autonomy are also related to security of attachment to close others at the relational level (La Guardia et al., 2000). Specifically, La Guardia et al. (2000) found that there is substantial within-person variation in a person's security of attachment to various close others, with one important predictor of this variation being the extent to which the significant other satisfies one's need for autonomy.

Autonomy has also been studied with regard to interpersonal behavior. For example, trait autonomy is associated with more satisfying and honest naturally occurring interactions with family and friends (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996). Additionally, research has examined the degree to which people who cause negative interpersonal predicaments respond by trying to save face, blame others, and aggravate the distress (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996). In these studies, an orientation toward autonomy was associated with fewer attempts to save face and blame others defensively. Theoretically, this was because when one feels autonomous, one is less invested in defending or protecting a particular self-image. Thus, the individual becomes more open to events and information regardless of whether it portrays the self in a positive or potentially negative light.

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Turning to romantic relationships, general associations between feeling autonomous in one's relationship and reported coping and satisfaction in romantic relationships have been reported. For example, Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, and Vallerand (1990) studied 63 heterosexual couples who completed questionnaires on their feelings of relationship autonomy, their perceptions of agreement on a variety of issues, and their satisfaction in the relationship. Path analyses supported a model in which relative autonomy toward the relationship predicted perceived agreement, which in turn predicted relationship satisfaction for men and women. The Blais et al. (1990) study is important for several reasons. First, it did not merely test yet another predictor of relationship satisfaction, but also theoretically accounted for why that construct should predict satisfaction. Namely, feeling autonomous in one's relationship would lead an individual to perceive and report more adaptive couple behaviors, which in turn leads the individual to feel happier in the relationship. Second, the study operationalized autonomy in a person's relationship as reasons for being in the relationship. This allowed relatively autonomous reasons (e.g., because I love the many fun and exciting times I share with my partner) and less autonomous reasons (e.g., because I would feel guilty if I separated from my partner) to be examined as autonomous motivation.

Another study examined trait autonomy in the context of romantic relationships. Knee et al. (2002) studied 61 couples' perceptions of themselves and their ideal partner and then had couples engage in a semistructured interview about their relationship. The interview was designed to magnify minor discrepancies in how partners perceived the relationship. Participants were then instructed to discuss these differing views for 10 min and to try to come to some resolution while being videotaped. Several relevant findings emerged. First, a less autonomous orientation was associated with egocentrically rating one's ideal partner according to how one views oneself. Second, an autonomous orientation was associated with more relationship-maintaining coping strategies, whereas a less autonomous orientation was associated with more denial. Finally, during the discussion, an autonomous orientation was associated with less negative emotion and more positive interaction behaviors.

While the findings from Blais et al. (1990) and Knee et al. (2002) clearly supported a theoretical model derived from self-determination theory, the studies had limitations as well. First, both studies relied on self-reported data, leaving the role of actual behavior unclear. Further, Knee et al.'s (2002) semistructured interview procedure may have artificially exaggerated how partners viewed each other and the importance of the issues being discussed. Second, both studies examined autonomy at only one level; relationship autonomy was measured in Blais et al. (1990) and trait autonomy was measured in Knee et al. (2002). Recent theoretical approaches have advocated a hierarchical model in which trait motivation predicts domain-specific motivation, which in turn predicts the relevant outcomes (Vallerand, 1997). Third, the role of the partner's autonomy in the individual's own perceptions and feelings about the relationship was not examined. Thus, the potential dyadic influence of relationship autonomy was not addressed. Fourth, the extent to which autonomy would be associated with how partners approach and resolve more natural disagreements and conflicts remained unclear.

The current studies go beyond previous research by examining (a) naturally occurring disagreements as well as laboratory-

induced conflicts (Studies 1 and 4); (b) the role of autonomy in more understanding and less defensive responses to conflict (Studies 2, 3, and 4); (c) the degree to which a partner's autonomy plays a role in an individual's own perceptions and outcomes (Studies 3 and 4); (d) the role of trait autonomy (Studies 1 and 2); and (e) whether relationship autonomy predicts observed behavior during an actual conflict (Study 4).

In Study 1, it was hypothesized that trait autonomy would predict relationship autonomy, which would then predict relationship satisfaction following naturally occurring disagreements. In Study 2, it was hypothesized that this same sequence of autonomy would predict more understanding and less defensive responses to conflict. In Study 3, we examined couples and tested whether a partner's autonomy predicts the individual's own response to conflict, which in turn predicts satisfaction with the relationship. In Study 4, we tested whether relationship autonomy predicts how an individual actually behaves during an induced conflict between partners.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants in heterosexual romantic relationships recorded relationship disagreements, as they occurred, over a 10-day period. We hypothesized that trait autonomy would predict relationship autonomy, which would in turn predict satisfaction after disagreements with a partner. In addition to the hypothesized model, the design allowed us to examine several potential third variables. Specifically, it was possible that autonomy led people to (a) perceive fewer disagreements; (b) perceive more resolution of the disagreement; and (c) have shorter discussions, which in turn allowed them to remain satisfied. We tested whether these variables accounted for the hypothesized associations.

Method

Participants

Participants were 128 undergraduate individuals who were currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least 1 month, who received extra credit for completing the study.¹ The sample was 41% Caucasian, 27% Hispanic/Latino, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, 8% African American, and 8% who chose "other." The sample was biased strongly toward women (86%). This was due in part to the composition of the undergraduate student body and also to the voluntary nature of participation. The sample consisted mostly of individuals in serious dating relationships, with most participants exclusively dating (48%), nearly engaged (28%), or engaged (6%), and others casually dating (8%) or married (10%). The average age was 21 years old ($SD = 3.48$ years). The average length of relationship was 2.4 years ($SD = 2$ years).

Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires in a Latin square design that included measures of trait autonomy, relationship autonomy, perceived conflict in the relationship, and several constructs included for other

¹ One month was an arbitrary criterion that provided the individual with sufficient time to feel that he or she was in a somewhat committed relationship and allowed the processes in which we were interested to begin to flourish.

purposes.² Diary records were completed after each disagreement over a period of 10 days. These diaries assessed the time and length of discussion, the time the record was completed, satisfaction after the disagreement, perceived resolution of the disagreement, and the extent to which the issue had been discussed previously. Disagreement was broadly defined as any interaction in which it was apparent to participants that they and their partner disagreed. This definition was clarified by describing that a disagreement (a) involves at least some discussion (e.g., they and their partner talk about a difference in opinion); (b) involves a difference in opinion that includes some sort of interaction, even if only for a few seconds and even if only verbal (e.g., on the telephone); (c) is not necessarily a major conflict or fight, as we were equally interested in everyday minor differences of opinion as well as more major disagreements. We chose to define disagreement this way because we were primarily interested in examining peoples' responses to a range of interactions involving conflict. We acknowledge that partners may have experienced disagreements that they did not discuss, but the focus of this study was about their responses to experiencing conflict as part of a couple. Participants also indicated the topic of disagreement and selected as many topics as relevant (e.g., money, time spent together). Upon returning the records for the 10-day period, participants completed a follow-up questionnaire assessing perceived accuracy of records.

Measures

Trait autonomy. Trait autonomy was assessed by the Self-Determination Scale (SDS; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996), which consists of 10 pairs of statements that participants rate by using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*Only A feels true*) to 5 (*Both feel equally true*) to 9 (*Only B feels true*). The following statements are an example: "What I do is often not what I would choose to do" versus "I am free to do whatever I decide to do." The SDS was designed to measure individual differences in the extent to which people tend to function in an autonomous way. Items focus on being aware of one's feelings and sense of self, as well as feeling a sense of choice in one's behavior. The subscales of Self-Awareness and Choice can be used either separately or together as an overall autonomy score. Given that our conceptual definition of relationship autonomy consisted of both aspects of autonomy, the combined SDS score was used in these studies. Test-retest reliability of the index has been reported as $r = .77$ over 8 weeks. Trait autonomy ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 1.28$) was not significantly correlated with age or relationship length. Internal reliability in this study was .75.

Relationship autonomy. The Couple Motivation Questionnaire (Blais et al., 1990) assesses one's autonomy in the form of reasons for being in the relationship. The questionnaire begins with the stem, "Why are you in the relationship?" Each of the 18 items then provides a reason for being in the relationship, and responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 (*does not correspond at all*) and 7 (*corresponds exactly*). A simplex pattern was evident among the subscales such that those reflecting more autonomous reasons were more positively related to one another and those reflecting less autonomous reasons were more positively related to one another. Further, subscales reflecting more autonomous reasons were negatively related to those reflecting less autonomous reasons. In accord with Blais et al. (1990), an index of relationship autonomy was computed by weighting the items according to where they fell on the relative autonomy continuum. For further details on how the weights were derived, see Blais et al. (1990). Sample items are as follows: "There is nothing motivating me to stay in my relationship with my partner" (weighted -3); "Because people who are important to me are proud of our relationship and I would not want to disappoint them" (weighted -2); "Because I would feel guilty if I separated from my partner" (weighted -1); "Because this is the person I have chosen to share life plans that are important to me" (weighted 1); "Because I value the way my relationship with my partner allows me to improve myself as a person" (weighted 2); and "Because I

love the many fun and exciting times I share with my partner" (weighted 3).

An overall autonomy index was computed from the weighted subscales with higher scores indicating more autonomous relationship motivation. Scores ranged from -17.08 to 36.00 ($M = 18.04$, $SD = 11.57$). The positive mean indicated that participants generally tended to endorse more (relative to less) autonomous reasons for being in the relationship. Relationship autonomy was not significantly correlated with age or relationship length. To compute internal reliability, each subscale was weighted according to its location on the autonomy continuum, and Cronbach's alpha was computed for these weighted subscale scores. Internal reliability of the relationship autonomy index was .76.

Relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction after disagreement was assessed on each diary record by an abbreviated form of the Quality of Relationship Index, adapted from the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). Four items were included that assess the extent to which individuals are satisfied and happy with their relationship at that moment on a scale of 1 (*very strong disagreement*) to 7 (*very strong agreement*). The four items were as follows: "Right now, my relationship with my partner is stable"; "Right now, our relationship is strong"; "Right now, my relationship with my partner makes me happy"; and "Right now, I really feel like part of a team with my partner." Items were averaged (on each record) such that higher scores reflected higher relationship satisfaction ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.59$). Internal reliability across repeated measures was .95.

Follow-up questionnaire. Six items addressed the perceived accuracy of responses on the diary records. All items were rated on 7-point scales and assessed (a) how difficult it was to record the disagreements, (b) how accurate participants believed their records were, (c) their best estimate of the percentage of disagreements that were not recorded, (d) how much keeping the diary records decreased their tendency to have disagreements, (e) how much it increased their tendency to have disagreements, and (f) how many hours per day they interacted with their partner.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Participants recorded 908 disagreements over the 10-day period, with an average of 5.43 per person. Disagreements, on average, lasted 21.47 minutes ($SD = 48$). On average, 2.3 hours ($SD = 5$) elapsed between the time the event occurred and the time it was actually recorded. Participants did not feel it was especially difficult to record the disagreements ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.46$); felt their diary records were fairly accurate ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 0.94$); estimated that they were able to record an average of 88.46% of disagreements; felt that keeping their records did not increase ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.39$) or decrease ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.55$) their tendency to have disagreements; and that on average, they were with their partner 4–7 hours per day. Percentage of disagreements not recorded was significantly correlated with higher relationship autonomy ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) but not with satisfaction or trait autonomy. Ten participants did not complete the follow-up questionnaire and thus may not have completed all 10 days of data collection. The model tested remained the same with or without these noncom-

² The Study 1 data are part of a larger data set on implicit theories of relationships. Portions of Study 1 data were described in Knee, Patrick, Vietor, and Neighbors (2004). Those data were limited to implicit theories of relationships as moderators of how experienced conflict is associated with relationship quality.

plers. Results reported are for all participants and all data available.

Preliminary analyses examined whether trait or relationship autonomy was associated with the nature of events recorded. Trait autonomy was associated with recording more disagreements ($r = .24, p < .01$), with perceiving that disagreements were relatively more resolved ($r = .21, p < .05$), and marginally with recording shorter disagreements ($r = -.17, p < .07$). Relationship autonomy was correlated with perceived resolution ($r = .27, p < .05$), but was not significantly correlated with more disagreements. Major analyses were repeated by controlling for these variables and are reported accordingly in a later section. Trait autonomy and relationship autonomy were not significantly correlated with latency of completion, the number of times partners had discussed the issue previously, or reporting disagreements of a particular type.

Path Analyses

The structure of the data was such that disagreements were nested within persons. Level 1 variables were event variables (satisfaction on each diary record) and were nested within Level 2 person variables.^{3,4} Analyses that involved only Level 2 variables were conducted with ordinary least squares regression. For analyses that involved event level variables, a multilevel modeling approach using the PROC MIXED routine in SAS was used (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998). Coefficients were derived from a random coefficients model by using restricted maximum likelihood estimation. This technique is conceptually similar to a "slopes as outcomes" approach where intercepts and slopes are estimated for each individual in a Level 1 model. Coefficients from the Level 1 model are then incorporated into the Level 2 model. Although some software packages (e.g., HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) specify the model for each level separately, PROC MIXED uses a single equation that simultaneously models variation at multiple levels (Singer, 1998). For detailed description and examples of this approach using event-contingent diary data, see Nezlek (2001).

The analyses proceeded according to Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger's (1998) four steps in testing mediation. The model for Step 1 tested whether trait autonomy predicts satisfaction and included the two fixed effects of an intercept and slope for trait autonomy and one random effect for the intercept in predicting satisfaction. The model for Step 2 tested whether trait autonomy predicts relationship autonomy and included the two fixed effects of an intercept and slope for trait autonomy predicting relationship autonomy and no random effects. The model for Step 3 tested whether relationship autonomy predicts satisfaction controlling for trait autonomy and included the three fixed effects of an intercept and slopes for trait autonomy and relationship autonomy predicting satisfaction and one random effect for the intercept. In that same model, Step 4 tested whether the association between trait autonomy and satisfaction is no longer significant or is substantially reduced, controlling for relationship autonomy.

In the first step, the association between the predictor (trait autonomy) and the criterion (satisfaction) was significant, $F(1, 118) = 4.55, p < .05, \beta = .16$, indicating that higher trait autonomy was associated with higher satisfaction after disagreements. In the second step, the association between the predictor

(trait autonomy) and the mediator (relationship autonomy) was significant, $F(1, 120) = 5.16, p < .05, \beta = .22$, indicating that trait autonomy predicted higher relationship autonomy. In the third step, the mediator (relationship autonomy) significantly predicted the criterion (satisfaction) controlling for the predictor (trait autonomy), $F(1, 116) = 42.36, p < .001, \beta = .41$, indicating that relationship autonomy predicted satisfaction, controlling for trait autonomy. In that same model, the association between the predictor (trait autonomy) and the criterion (satisfaction) was no longer significant, controlling for the mediator (relationship autonomy), suggesting that the association between trait autonomy and satisfaction was largely mediated by relationship autonomy.

We further evaluated the magnitude of the reduction in Step 4 with a modified version of the Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This modified formula includes the addition of the product of the standard errors of the relevant paths. Thus, a significant Sobel z suggests that the reduction in the association between the predictor (trait autonomy) and the criterion (satisfaction) with and without controlling for the mediator (relationship autonomy) is reliable. The magnitude of the reduction in how trait autonomy predicts satisfaction without ($\beta = .16$) and with ($\beta = .05$) relationship autonomy in the model was statistically significant (Sobel $z = 2.14, p < .05$). Thus, general support was found for full mediation such that autonomous individuals tend to feel more autonomous about being in the relationship, which in turn predicts feeling more satisfied (relative to others) after disagreements.⁵

³ It could be argued that disagreements were nested within days, which were nested within persons. However, day was not relevant here because participants completed records without regard to day. Disagreements often occurred (and were recorded) at multiple times per day (or night), and thus, day is not germane to the design (Nezlek, 2001).

⁴ As mentioned earlier, the Study 1 sample was biased strongly toward women (93% were women) because of their increased willingness to participate in a relationship study of this nature. This made it unreasonable to include sex as a variable in the analyses.

⁵ We checked for potential outliers on age and relationship length. The sample in Study 1 contained three outliers whose age was greater than 3.29 standard deviations beyond the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). When these data were removed, the pattern of results remained. Specifically, relationship autonomy still predicted satisfaction, controlling for trait autonomy, $F(1, 112) = 43.17, p < .001, \beta = .41$; and trait autonomy no longer predicted satisfaction, controlling for relationship autonomy ($F < 1$). In Study 2, when four outliers on age were removed, the pattern of results was similar. Specifically, controlling for trait autonomy, relationship autonomy predicted understanding, $F(1, 191) = 21.08, p < .001, \beta = .32$; and defensiveness, $F(1, 191) = 24.08, p < .001, \beta = -.30$. In the same equation, trait autonomy did not significantly predict understanding but did predict defensiveness, $F(1, 191) = 4.51, p < .05, \beta = -.15$. In Study 3, when one outlier on age and two on relationship length were removed, all paths that were significant before remained significant.

We also examined whether results were affected by those who were about to break up and those who were married. Thus, 1 individual who reported breaking up with the partner and 12 married participants were removed from the data. A similar mediation pattern emerged. Relationship autonomy still predicted satisfaction, controlling for trait autonomy, $F(1, 103) = 33.96, p < .001, \beta = .39$; and trait autonomy no longer predicted satisfaction, controlling for relationship autonomy ($F < 1$). In Study 2, when 26 married participants and 7 who were in the process of breaking up were removed, the pattern of results was the same. Controlling for trait

However, a number of alternative explanations remained, some of which we attempted to rule out. First, it was possible that those who were higher in trait autonomy reported fewer disagreements and thus were more likely to remain satisfied. However, as mentioned earlier, trait autonomy was positively correlated with number of events recorded ($r = .24, p < .01$), the opposite direction of what this alternative explanation would require. The positive correlation may reflect the notion that trait autonomy is related to more careful recording of data, greater willingness to acknowledge disagreements, or possibly being closer and having more opportunities for disagreements. In any case, we repeated the analysis by controlling for mean number of events given that the positive correlation may reflect a reporting bias to some degree. Contrary to this alternative explanation, relationship autonomy remained a significant predictor of satisfaction, controlling for both trait autonomy and mean number of events recorded, $F(1, 116) = 42.01, p < .001, \beta = .40$.

Another potential alternative explanation was that those who felt more autonomous may have been more likely to perceive resolution of the conflict and therefore more likely to feel satisfied. Accordingly, perceived resolution of disagreements was included in the model. However, relationship autonomy still predicted satisfaction, controlling for both trait autonomy and perceived resolution of the disagreement, $F(1, 116) = 33.85, p < .001, \beta = .39$. Thus, it was not likely the case that feeling autonomous led participants to remain satisfied after disagreements simply because they perceived that it had been resolved.

Another possibility was that the disagreements of autonomous individuals were briefer and presumably less involved and that this was related to satisfaction. However, when length of discussion was included in the model, it did not account for the path through relationship autonomy, $F(1, 116) = 52.53, p < .05, \beta = .44$. Thus, it seems unlikely that feeling autonomous led to feelings of satisfaction simply because the disagreements were briefer and possibly more benign.

In sum, on the basis of the path model presented, feeling autonomous as a person is associated with feeling autonomous in one's relationship, which is in turn associated with remaining satisfied after disagreements. Feeling autonomous may orient one toward events in a more understanding and less defensive manner. It is this more understanding and less defensive response to conflict as a function of feeling autonomous that we examined in Study 2.

autonomy, relationship autonomy predicted more understanding, $F(1, 163) = 21.40, p < .001, \beta = .31$; and less defensiveness, $F(1, 163) = 16.45, p < .001, \beta = .29$. In the same equation, trait autonomy did not significantly predict understanding but did predict defensiveness, $F(1, 163) = 5.48, p < .05, \beta = -.18$. In Study 3, when 27 married participants were removed, all paths that were significant before remained significant.

We also checked for skewness and found that relationship autonomy was somewhat skewed such that participants tended to report more autonomous relative to nonautonomous reasons. The variable was transformed according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), and data for relationship autonomy were reanalyzed. The pattern of results for relationship autonomy in Studies 1, 2, and 3 remained the same. Finally, because of the high ratio of women to men in Studies 1 and 2, we reanalyzed the results without including the men and found that all paths that were significant before remained significant.

Study 2

In Study 2, we extended the model to different criteria. The model presented in Study 1 was limited to relationship satisfaction after disagreements. Precisely how and why autonomy was relevant to maintaining satisfaction remained unanswered. From the perspective of self-determination theory, autonomous functioning is thought to be associated with attempts to understand what is occurring, without defending against it, avoiding it, or reinterpreting it (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). Indeed, recent evidence supports the hypothesis that an autonomous orientation is associated with openly engaging experience, whereas a nonautonomous orientation is associated with defending against experience (Hodgins, Yacko, Gottlieb, Goodwin, & Rath, 2004). We hypothesized that autonomous functioning would be associated with less defensiveness and more attempts to understand one's partner and the conflict. Specifically, we hypothesized that trait autonomy would predict relationship autonomy (as in Study 1), and that relationship autonomy would in turn predict both less defensive and more understanding responses to conflict. Further, we attempted to rule out whether autonomy appears beneficial simply because those higher in autonomy tend to perceive less conflict in the relationship.

Method

Participants

Two hundred three individuals (82% women) currently involved in heterosexual romantic relationships for at least 1 month were recruited from introductory psychology classes. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 years old with a mean age of 23 years ($SD = 5$). Average relationship length was 2.6 years ($SD = 2.5$). Forty percent of participants reported that they were exclusively dating, 23% reported they were nearly engaged, 16% were casually dating, 12% were married, 6% were engaged, and 3% were currently breaking up. The sample was ethnically diverse: 33% Caucasian, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 23% Asian/Pacific Islander, 16% African American, and 5% who chose "other." Participants received extra credit in return for their participation.

Measures

Trait autonomy. Trait autonomy was assessed by using the same measure described in Study 1. Trait autonomy was not significantly correlated with age, relationship length, living with partner, or level of involvement. Internal reliability in this study was .75.

Relationship autonomy. Relationship autonomy was also assessed by using the same measure described in Study 1. Relationship autonomy was not significantly correlated with age or living with partner. Higher relationship autonomy was correlated with longer relationship duration ($r = .19, p < .01$). Longer duration, however, was not significantly correlated with understanding or defensive responses to conflict (see below). Internal reliability of the relationship autonomy index (computed the same way as in Study 1) was .72.

Understanding and defensive responses to conflict. Self-reported responses to conflict were assessed with 12 items developed to represent attempts to better understand or avoid conflict. For each item, participants completed the statement "After you and your partner have a disagreement or misunderstanding, to what extent do you tend to feel that it led you to _____?" Items were answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Subscale scores were created by averaging responses to openness and defensiveness items separately. Sample items for the Understanding subscale included "Explore other points of view," "Understand

your relationship better,” and “Understand your partner better.” Sample items from the Defensiveness subscale included “Pretend to agree with your partner,” “Want to leave or walk away,” and “Feel detached or distant from your partner.” Internal reliabilities were .83 and .72 for Understanding and Defensiveness, respectively. The two subscales were only moderately correlated ($r = -.28, p < .01$) and were examined separately in subsequent analyses.

Perceived conflict. Perceptions of conflict were assessed with 13 items on a scale from 1 (*always agree*) to 7 (*always disagree*), based on the Consensus subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Participants reported the degree to which they have disagreements with their partner on 13 issues (e.g., demonstrations of affection). Internal reliability in this study was .86.

Procedure

Participants involved in heterosexual romantic relationships were recruited for a study on perceptions of relationship experiences. Participants completed questionnaires in a Latin square design to assess trait autonomy, relationship autonomy, responses to conflict, and perceptions of overall conflict in their current relationship. Participants completed all questionnaires in a single setting by themselves. Completed packets were collected the following class day, at which point participants were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Path analyses were conducted to examine whether relationship autonomy predicted understanding and defensive responses to conflict. Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables in the model. As shown, trait autonomy was correlated with higher relationship autonomy, greater understanding, and less defensive responses to relationship conflict. Mediation analyses were conducted to examine whether relationship autonomy mediated the associations between trait autonomy and responses to conflict. A series of simultaneous multiple regressions was computed because all variables were assessed at the same level (and thus the design was not hierarchical). The analyses generally proceeded according to the same four steps as in Study 1, except that there were now two criteria. Figure 1 presents the path model that summarizes the mediation analyses. First, the links between the predictor and the criteria were established. As shown, trait autonomy was associated with reporting both more understanding, $F(1, 197) = 12.51, p < .001, \beta = .25$; and less defensive responses to conflict, $F(1, 197) = 17.80, p < .001, \beta = -.29$. Next, the link between the predictor and hypothesized mediator was established. Trait autonomy was positively associated with relationship autonomy, $F(1, 196) = 29.53, p < .001, \beta = .36$. It is important to note that relationship autonomy was both positively associated with understanding responses, $F(1, 195) = 20.64, p <$

.001, $\beta = .32$; and negatively associated with defensive responses when simultaneously controlling for trait autonomy, $F(1, 195) = 25.46, p < .001, \beta = -.30$. In that same model, trait autonomy no longer significantly predicted understanding responses but did still significantly predict defensive responses, $F(1, 195) = 5.45, p < .05, \beta = -.16$. Finally, the magnitude of the reduction in how trait autonomy predicted understanding responses without ($\beta = .25$) and with ($\beta = .13$) relationship autonomy in the model was statistically significant (Sobel $z = 2.59, p < .01$). Additionally, the magnitude of the reduction in how trait autonomy predicted defensive responses without ($\beta = -.29$) and with ($\beta = -.16$) relationship autonomy in the model was statistically significant (Sobel $z = -2.59$). Thus, partial mediation was found to support the notion that feeling autonomous as a person leads one to have more open and less defensive responses to conflict, partly because it is conducive to feeling more autonomous toward the relationship.

We again attempted to rule out a seemingly apparent alternative explanation—namely, that autonomous individuals may generally perceive less conflict in the relationship and thus be more likely to respond constructively (through attempts to understand the issue) rather than destructively (by defensively denying or avoiding the issue). As part of the questionnaire assessment, participants had reported the degree to which they argued with their partner about a variety of common issues. Accordingly, perceived conflict was included along with trait autonomy and relationship autonomy as predictors of conflict responses. It is important to note that relationship autonomy remained a significant predictor of both understanding, $F(1, 193) = 11.99, p < .001, \beta = .29$; and defensive responses, $F(1, 193) = 5.99, p < .05, \beta = -.19$. Thus, it does not seem likely that feeling autonomous facilitated more understanding and less defensive responses merely because it made one perceive less conflict. As in Study 1, the sample was made up largely of women. Results remained the same after the men were dropped from the analyses. One question that remained was whether one’s partner’s relationship autonomy uniquely contributes to how one responds to conflicts. We turned to this question in Study 3.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 examined individuals in romantic relationships and were limited to testing individual models rather than examining both partners in a relationship. Study 3 was designed to address this limitation while also better integrating the findings from previous studies. It is possible that feeling autonomous toward the relationship has benefits not only for oneself but for one’s partner

Table 1
Zero-Order Correlations Between Key Variables in Study 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Trait autonomy	—					6.37	1.23
2. Relationship autonomy	.36***	—				17.04	12.11
3. Understanding	.24***	.33***	—			4.64	1.15
4. Defensiveness	-.29***	-.40***	-.28***	—		3.95	1.20
5. Perceived conflict	-.36***	-.57***	-.26***	.44***	—	2.89	0.94

*** $p < .001$.

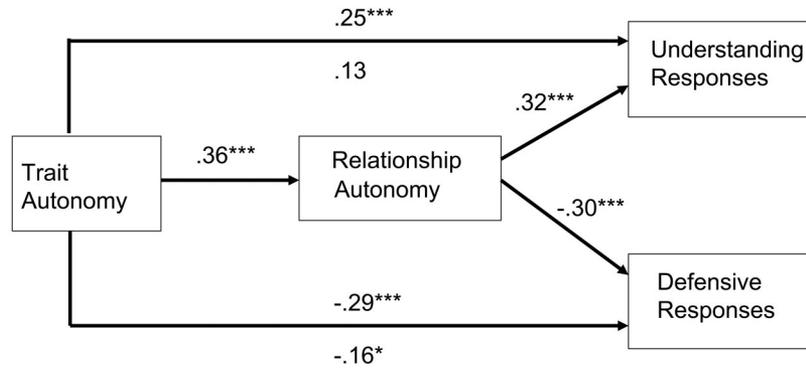


Figure 1. Mediation model for trait autonomy predicting responses to conflict. Path coefficients are standardized. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

as well. Indeed, it is the potential of a partner’s perceptions and behaviors to affect those of the other partner that characterizes the mutual influence found in romantic relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). To feel autonomous toward one’s relationship is to fully endorse one’s connection to the partner with a deep personal value for and interest in maintaining the relationship. An authentic, personal valuing of the relationship may be beneficial not only for one’s own response to conflict and feelings of satisfaction, but also for those responses and perceptions of one’s partner. When an individual’s partner feels more autonomous toward the relationship, the individual may feel less defensive and more understanding in raising issues and discussing them and may be better able to remain satisfied as well. If an individual’s partner were less autonomous toward the relationship, this may affect how the person feels about discussing conflicts and how satisfied the person feels with the relationship. Further, these potential partner effects would be independent of one’s own relationship autonomy and thus would have unique power in predicting one’s own relationship feelings and conflict responses.

In Study 3, we gathered data on both partners by using a sample of couples. This was done to address two important limitations of the previous studies. First, the previous studies were based exclusively on individual-level data when it is well known that the

partners within a relationship influence each other in important, theoretically interesting ways. Second, the previous studies were limited to self-reports of one’s own autonomy, responses to conflict, and feelings of satisfaction. The study of couples allowed a better analysis of how the perceptions and feelings of another may influence one’s own reported perceptions and feelings within the relationship.

The design of Study 3 allowed for simultaneous estimation of actor and partner effects (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002). An actor effect occurs when one’s own score on a predictor variable predicts his or her own score on the criterion. For example, one’s own autonomy toward the relationship predicts one’s own responses to conflict. A partner effect occurs when a partner’s score on a predictor predicts one’s own score on the criterion. For example, a partner’s autonomy toward the relationship may predict how one responds to conflict. In this way, partner effects from the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) directly model the mutual influence that may occur between individuals in a dyadic relationship (Campbell & Kashy, 2002).

In Study 3, we also attempted to better understand how relationship autonomy predicts satisfaction by integrating the findings from Studies 1 and 2 within a single model. Figure 2 shows the conceptual model for conflict responses and satisfaction that we

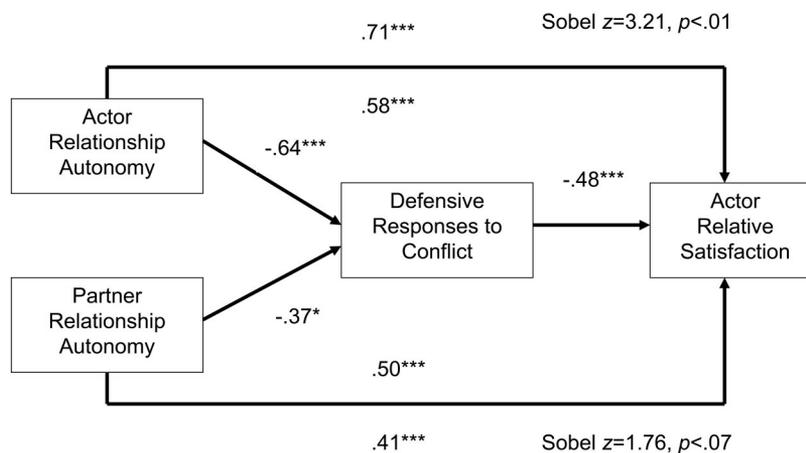


Figure 2. Path model tested in Study 3. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

set out to examine. Study 1 suggested that relationship autonomy predicts one's satisfaction with the relationship after disagreements. Study 2 suggested that relationship autonomy predicts the degree to which one responds to conflict with more understanding and less defensiveness. In Study 3, we examined whether relationship autonomy predicts feeling more satisfied, less defensive, and more understanding about disagreements in a sample of couples. Specifically, we hypothesized that both one's own and a partner's relationship autonomy would be associated with one's own responses to conflict, which would in turn be associated with one's own satisfaction. It is important to note that both actor and partner effects of relationship autonomy were modeled simultaneously to test whether one partner's relationship autonomy predicted the other partner's responses to conflict and feelings of satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Seventy heterosexual couples were recruited from introductory psychology classes. Couples were instructed to complete the packets in a single sitting and not to discuss their answers with their partner. Questionnaires within the packet were counterbalanced according to a Latin square design. The average age of participants was 23 years ($SD = 4.9$ years). To participate in the study, couples must have been in the relationship for at least 1 month ($M = 2.6$ years, $SD = 2.0$). Forty-eight percent were exclusively dating, 20% were married, 18% were nearly engaged, 10% were engaged, and 2% were casually dating. The sample was ethnically diverse: 39% Caucasian, 18% Asian/Pacific Islander, 15.8% African American, 16.5% Hispanic/Latino, and 8.3% who chose "other." Participants recruited from classes received extra credit, and each couple was entered into a drawing for a gift certificate to a local restaurant.

Measures

Relationship autonomy. Relationship autonomy was assessed with the same measure described in Studies 1 and 2. Couple-level correlations (male and female scores averaged within a couple) showed that relationship autonomy was not significantly correlated with living with partner or length of relationship. Relationship autonomy was correlated with being older ($r = .26, p < .05$). Being older, however, was not significantly correlated with understanding or defensive responses to conflict and will not be discussed further. Internal reliabilities for relationship autonomy were .66 and .74 for men and women, respectively.

Understanding and defensive responses to conflict. Responses to conflict were assessed by using the same measure described in Study 2. Internal reliabilities in this study were .75 (men) and .85 (women) for understanding and .69 (men) and .95 (women) for defensiveness.

Relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction was assessed with a six-item version of the Quality of Relationship Index used in Study 1 without the phrase "right now" (e.g., "My relationship with my partner makes me happy"). Internal reliabilities were .89 and .95 for men and women, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables from men (above) and women (below), along with within-couple correlations down the diagonal. As shown, relationship autonomy was positively associated with satisfaction and negatively associated with defensiveness for both men and women. Relationship autonomy was positively associated with understanding only for women. Satisfaction was associated with less defensiveness among men and women and with more understanding only among women; and understanding and defensive responses were negatively correlated with each other among both genders. Within-couple correlations for relationship autonomy, satisfaction, and defensive responses revealed significant associations between partners.

These couple data were analyzed with regard to three steps in testing whether responses to conflict mediated the association between relationship autonomy and satisfaction. APIM allowed us to test actor and partner effects simultaneously. The first step was whether one's own and one's partner's relationship autonomy (the predictors) were associated with feeling more satisfied with the relationship (the criterion). The second step tested whether one's own and one's partner's relationship autonomy (the predictors) were associated with reporting more defensive and less understanding responses to conflict (the mediators). The third step was the question of whether associations between actor and partner relationship autonomy (the predictors) and satisfaction (the criteria) were reduced, controlling for responses to conflict (the mediators).

The structure of the data was nested because data were collected from both partners. The APIM (Kashy & Kenny, 2000) was used to address the nonindependence of dyadic data and test whether one's partner's relationship autonomy has unique prediction for one's own relationship autonomy. In the analyses below, an actor effect occurs when one's own score on relationship autonomy predicts one's own score on the criterion. A partner effect occurs when one's partner's score on relationship autonomy predicts one's own score on the criterion. The PROC MIXED routine in SAS, with restricted maximum likelihood estimation, was used to

Table 2
Study 3 Correlations Among Men (Above), Women (Below), and Within-Couple (Along the Diagonal)

Variable	1	2	3	4	Men		Women	
					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Relationship autonomy	.29*	.67***	.05	-.48***	20.83	8.82	23.54	8.10
2. Satisfaction	.57***	.53***	.14	-.56***	5.87	1.06	6.16	0.93
3. Understanding	.59***	.46***	.18	-.39***	4.56	0.99	4.71	1.25
4. Defensiveness	-.55***	-.67***	-.58***	.30*	3.38	1.09	3.70	1.35

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

estimate all path coefficients (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002, for sample arrangement of data and SAS code). Gender was included to control for potential variation between men and women and also to test for potential gender interactions with each path. PROC MIXED estimates paths for a single criterion at a time, and thus, understanding and defensive responses to conflict were examined separately.

Figure 2 represents both the hypothesized model and the observed values when defensive responses were the presumed mediator. The first step tested whether actor and partner relationship autonomy (the predictors) were simultaneously associated with actor's satisfaction with the relationship (the criterion). Actor autonomy and partner autonomy were simultaneously entered to predict actor satisfaction. As shown, both actor and partner relationship autonomy were uniquely associated with higher satisfaction. Thus, one's satisfaction was predicted not only by one's own feelings of autonomy toward the relationship, but uniquely by those of one's partner as well. These findings support the first step in the test of mediation.

The second step tested whether actor and partner relationship autonomy (the predictors) were simultaneously associated with reported responses to conflict (the mediators). Actor autonomy and partner autonomy were simultaneously entered to predict defensive responses. As shown in Figure 2, actor and partner relationship autonomy were uniquely associated with reporting less defensive responses to conflict. Thus, one's own (and one's partner's) relationship autonomy independently predicted less defensive responses. In essence, an individual is less likely to respond defensively during conflict when both the individual and the partner feel more autonomous in the relationship. When it comes to how one responds to disagreements, a partner's autonomy toward the relationship appears especially useful in predicting how defensive one feels when there is a conflict. These findings support Step 2 in the test of mediation.

The third step tested whether the associations between actor and partner relationship autonomy (the predictors) and satisfaction (the criterion) were reduced after controlling for one's defensive responses to conflict (the mediator). When actor and partner autonomy were entered along with defensiveness in predicting satisfaction, defensiveness remained a significant predictor of satisfaction. In the same equation (Step 4), the associations for actor and partner autonomy were reduced but remained significant. Sobel tests revealed that defensiveness significantly mediated the association between actor autonomy and satisfaction (Sobel $z = 3.21, p < .01$) and marginally mediated the association between partner autonomy and satisfaction (Sobel $z = 1.76, p < .07$).

Understanding responses were examined as a potential mediator as well. Only actor autonomy significantly predicted understanding ($\beta = .47, p < .001$). In testing the mediation paths, understanding was not significantly associated with satisfaction, and both actor relationship autonomy and partner relationship autonomy remained significant predictors of higher satisfaction ($\beta = .65, p < .001$, and $\beta = .50, p < .001$, for actor and partner autonomy, respectively). Although actor autonomy predicted understanding and satisfaction, partner autonomy did not uniquely predict understanding, and understanding did not significantly predict satisfaction. Thus, these data do not support a mediating role for understanding. One possible explanation for why understanding was not relevant to satisfaction may be that this sample of

participants tended to be very satisfied with their relationship. When already very satisfied, one may not expect negative behaviors to occur and may attend to them more than positive behaviors. Thus, positive events may not relate as strongly to perceptions and feelings about the relationship as much as negative events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, gender was included as both a covariate and in an additional step as a potential moderator (e.g., Gender \times Actor Autonomy) of the actor and partner associations described above. Two significant gender effects emerged. First, women generally reported less defensiveness, $F(1, 64) = 5.81, p < .05, \beta = -.41$. Second, a Gender \times Actor Autonomy interaction predicting understanding indicated that the association between actor relationship autonomy and understanding responses was stronger for women ($\beta = .72$) than for men ($\beta = .00$), $F(1, 102) = 13.84, p < .001, \beta = -.78$. Exploratory tests of potential Actor Relationship Autonomy \times Partner Relationship Autonomy interactions were not significant.

In sum, these data conceptually replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with couple data. However, these results go beyond those findings in that they show considerable evidence that how autonomous one's partner feels toward the relationship predicts how one responds to conflict and how satisfied one is with the relationship. Defensive responses partly mediated the association between relationship autonomy and satisfaction. Understanding did not significantly predict satisfaction and thus was not a mediator. One question that remained concerned the degree to which reports of how one responds to conflict bear any resemblance to how people actually behave during a conflict. It is precisely this question to which we turned in Study 4.

Study 4

Study 4 was included to examine whether the association between relationship autonomy and reported responses to conflict would carry over to observed behaviors during an actual conflict. We gathered data from couples to examine the unique role of partner relationship autonomy in both reported and observed reactions during conflict. The design was such that relationship autonomy was assessed in advance. Partners then engaged in two videotaped discussions about sources of disagreement in their relationship. Finally, partners reported their responses to conflict during the interaction. The videotaped interactions were independently coded for observed understanding and defensive behaviors. We specifically hypothesized that reported responses to conflict would be associated with observed responses to conflict. Further, relationship autonomy (actor and partner) would predict both reported and observed conflict responses.

Method

Participants

Seventy-five heterosexual couples were recruited from the University of Houston and surrounding area through flyers and announcements. Participants had to be in the relationship for at least 1 month. Two couples provided incomplete or inaccurate information and were not included in any analyses. Thus, the final sample consisted of 73 couples. Couples were paid \$30 for their participation. Regarding ethnicity, 46% were Caucasian, 21% were African American, 15% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 12% were

Hispanic/Latino, and 6% chose "other." The average age was 23 years old ($SD = 5.3$). The average length of relationship was 2.1 years ($SD = 1.6$).

Procedure

Partners first completed the relationship autonomy measure as described in Studies 1–3. Couples were then videotaped while they discussed relationship issues in the following semistructured manner. Each partner independently provided a topic that he or she perceived as a source of stress or disagreement in the relationship. Partners were then brought together to discuss the topics that each partner had generated. After a brief orientation to the procedure, partners were left alone for two 10-min sessions with the task of discussing each partner's chosen topic. The discussion was minimally structured in an attempt to encourage open discussion of authentic problems. The order of which partner's topic was discussed first was counterbalanced across couples such that half the time the man's issue was first and half the time the woman's issue was first. Each discussion proceeded for 10 min and was then interrupted by a knock on the door, at which time participants were told to switch topics. After the second discussion, participants completed a series of questionnaires regarding perceptions of the discussions and the relationship.

Measures

Relationship autonomy. Relationship autonomy was also assessed by using the same measure described in the previous studies. Relationship autonomy was not significantly correlated with relationship length or age at the couple level. Internal reliability of the relationship autonomy index (computed the same way as in the previous studies) was .68 for women and .69 for men.

Understanding and defensive responses to the conflict. Self-reported responses to the previous conflicts were assessed with the same measure described in Studies 2 and 3. Internal reliabilities for Understanding were .85 and .75 for women and men, respectively. Internal reliabilities for Defensiveness were .81 and .70 for women and men, respectively. The two subscales were again moderately correlated ($r = -.26, p < .05$).

Behavioral coding. Eight people (4 men, 4 women) who were blind to the hypotheses coded the videotaped interactions on a variety of dimensions that were later factor analyzed. Partners' behaviors were coded separately for the male and female partner, and coders alternated which partner was coded first. Interactions were coded on several dimensions by using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*none of the behavior*) to 7 (*extreme examples of the behavior*). Dimensions included the following: general expressiveness (e.g., talkative, eye contact, hand gestures, involved, communicative), positive expressiveness (e.g., smiling, open posture, strong intonation), blame (e.g., blames partner), reactivity (e.g., becomes upset with partner when discussing the problem), defensiveness (e.g., downplaying the problem, presenting the relationship in the best light, trying to prove that the relationship is ideal), attempting to understand partner's perspective (e.g., rephrasing partner's view, asking partner to clarify), asserting

own perspective (e.g., strongly assert one's own perspective), and supportiveness (e.g., partner was supportive of the other in discussing the problem). Reliability among the eight coders across all couples and interaction ratings was .94.

Factor analyses followed by promax (oblique) rotation were conducted on the behavioral judgments. We analyzed each discussion separately (first vs. second). The solutions were similar, and the data were combined for parsimony. A two-factor solution emerged, with the first factor measuring primarily understanding behaviors (including general expressiveness, positive expressiveness, attempting to understand partner's perspective, and supportiveness). The second factor measured defensive behaviors and included blame, reactivity, defensiveness, and assertiveness. Internal reliabilities for the understanding and defensive factors were .86 and .72, respectively. Understanding and defensive behaviors were not significantly correlated.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations among men and women, along with within-couple correlations. As shown, relationship autonomy was correlated with more reported understanding and less reported defensiveness for both genders. It is interesting to note that relationship autonomy was also correlated with more observed understanding among men and with less observed defensiveness among women, on the basis of behavior coded during an actual conflict. Further, reported defensiveness and observed defensiveness were correlated with each other among both genders. Reported understanding and observed understanding were correlated only among women. Thus, men's reported understanding was not related to their observed understanding during the conflict. Finally, within-couple correlations indicated significant associations between romantic partners on all variables.

Thus, support was generally found for the hypothesis that reported conflict responses would be correlated with observed conflict responses. Reported defensiveness and observed defensiveness were correlated among both genders, and reported understanding and observed understanding were correlated among women. Among men, reported and observed understanding were not significantly correlated.

To test the hypothesis that actor and partner autonomy would predict reported and observed conflict responses, we used the APIM with PROC MIXED, as in Study 3. Table 4 provides unstandardized and standardized coefficients along with standard errors and significance levels for actor and partner autonomy simultaneously predicting either reported or observed conflict responses. Gender was included in the model, as in Study 3, as a

Table 3
Study 4 Correlations Among Men (Above), Women (Below), and Within-Couple (Along the Diagonal)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	Men		Women	
						<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Relationship autonomy	.30**	.36***	-.46***	.24*	-.14	21.74	8.15	23.70	7.81
2. Reported understanding	.31**	.30**	-.15	.05	-.01	4.62	1.27	4.87	1.19
3. Reported defensiveness	-.44***	-.40***	.64***	-.51***	.36***	2.19	1.17	2.11	1.08
4. Observed understanding	.19	.25*	-.37**	.46***	-.19	3.95	0.63	4.12	0.46
5. Observed defensiveness	-.34**	-.36**	.61***	-.11	.65***	2.72	0.62	2.83	0.62

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

Table 4
Actor and Partner Relationship Autonomy Predicting Reported and Observed Understanding and Defensiveness

Outcome	Actor relationship autonomy			Partner relationship autonomy		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Reported						
Understanding	.04	.01	.51***	.01	.01	.25
Defensiveness	-.04	.01	-.53***	-.04	.01	-.53***
Observed						
Understanding	.01	.01	.38*	.01	.01	.38**
Defensiveness	-.01	.01	-.36*	-.01	.01	-.36 [†]

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

covariate to control for potential gender variation and in a later step to test for potential gender interactions (e.g., Gender \times Actor Autonomy). As shown, actor relationship autonomy significantly predicted more reported understanding and less reported defensiveness, as in Study 3. We found it important that this carried over to observed behavior as well in that actor autonomy predicted more observed understanding and less observed defensiveness during actual conflict. These behavioral associations were not limited to one's own relationship autonomy. One's partner's relationship autonomy uniquely predicted less reported defensiveness and both more observed understanding and less observed defensiveness.

Thus, support was generally found for the hypothesis that actor and partner relationship autonomy would simultaneously predict both reported and observed responses during an actual conflict. It should be noted that the coefficient for one's partner's autonomy predicting one's own reported understanding was not significant. However, it was moderate in magnitude and similar in direction. Further, the fact that one's partner's autonomy predicted observed understanding suggests that the relatively smaller coefficient may be as much a function of differences in reporting than of differences in actual behavior.

With regard to gender differences, women generally evidenced both more understanding and less defensive behaviors during conflict. In this way, women were somewhat more behaviorally expressive overall. No other associations with gender were significant, and gender did not significantly moderate any associations.

General Discussion

Autonomy, as defined in Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) self-determination theory, is important in understanding how people approach and manage conflict in romantic relationships. Those who are autonomous and, more specifically, those who are autonomously invested in a romantic relationship show less defensiveness and more understanding in the context of disagreements and in turn remain more satisfied with the relationship.

The benefits of relationship autonomy for how one approaches and responds to conflict are not limited to one's own autonomy but carry over to one's partner as well. Specifically, a partner's relationship autonomy uniquely predicted the individual's own satisfaction and defensiveness, controlling for the individual's own relationship autonomy. Feeling more autonomous toward the relationship may allow one's partner to feel supported uncondition-

ally and thus behave in a more understanding and less defensive manner when discussing and experiencing conflict. Indeed, recent literature suggests that people are more open and disclosing in times of emotional distress with those who are more autonomy supportive (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005). Our findings suggest that these benefits carry over to romantic partners as well. It may be easier to respond to conflict with more understanding and less defensiveness when one's partner feels autonomous and supports one's perceptions and feelings.

It is important to note that relationship autonomy predicted observed behavioral responses during a videotaped conflict in a controlled setting. Indeed, the potential benefits of relationship autonomy go beyond self-reported responses to conflict. One's own relationship autonomy predicted more observed understanding and less observed defensiveness during actual conflict. Further, one's partner's relationship autonomy uniquely predicted more observed understanding and somewhat less observed defensiveness. Thus, relationship autonomy relates both to what people say they do during relationship conflict and to what they actually do during relationship conflict in a controlled setting.

Finally, these findings highlight the simultaneous influences of autonomy as an individual difference and autonomy as a dyadic process in how partners approach and respond to conflict. The fact that trait autonomy, relationship autonomy, and partner autonomy all have relative associations with conflict responses and satisfaction suggests that conflict responses are based on qualities that partners bring to their relationship, as well as more emergent, dyadic properties of autonomy in the relationship. Further research on how these relative influences operate over time seems warranted.

Gender differences deserve mention. First, in Study 3, relationship autonomy predicted understanding responses more strongly for women than for men. This result is somewhat inconsistent with Study 4, which also involved couples and evidenced no significant gender differences in how relationship autonomy predicted understanding responses. Second, in Study 4, women tended to both report and display more understanding and defensive responses during the conflict. This may have been because women tend to have more relational and interdependent self-concepts and thus are generally more involved in and concerned about the maintenance of the relationship (e.g., Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999; Cross & Madson, 1997). However, whether women were simply more behaviorally active during the discussions or whether their behav-

iors reflected more understanding and defensive responses is difficult to ascertain from these data alone. It is interesting to note that in Study 4, men's reported understanding was not significantly correlated with their observed understanding, raising the question of whether it was simply more difficult to code men's behaviors or whether men provided somewhat biased reports of their understanding responses during the conflict.

More generally, these findings have important implications for understanding how romantic partners respond to conflict. Theoretically, a person who is autonomous has more optimal capacities for interpersonal functioning and is more personally committed, volitional, and persistent in maintaining relations with others. As past research has shown, higher trait autonomy is associated with more ability to take another's frame of reference, more empathy, and more honesty in social interactions (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996). Not only does autonomy involve attributes that are associated with better interpersonal functioning, but it has also been shown to promote commitment and persistence in a variety of ways (e.g., Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992; Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996).

The potential benefits of autonomy accrue for a variety of reasons according to self-determination theory but fundamentally because people have an innate psychological need to feel autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If feeling autonomous is a psychological need within relationships, then it makes sense that it is associated with feeling more satisfied with the relationship (Study 1) and with more understanding and less defensive reported (Studies 2 and 3) and observed (Study 4) reactions to conflict. Relationship autonomy involves a deep personal value for, and interest in, maintaining the relationship. Experientially, it is feeling that one's self is fully and noncoercively invested in the relationship. This kind of authentic, personal endorsement of one's connection with the partner allows an individual to approach conflicts with more understanding and less defensiveness. The construct of relationship autonomy, like trait autonomy, emphasizes the importance of personal endorsement of one's actions and the reasons for wanting to pursue them. Self-determination theory states that in order to achieve optimal functioning and well-being, one must be able to fulfill the basic psychological need for autonomy. That is, one must be able to ascribe the motivation for one's actions to one's personal freely chosen desire rather than obligations or rewards that are separable from the action itself. Thus, in order to maintain optimal functioning and well-being in a relationship, one must perceive that the individual is in the relationship because he or she personally values it at the deepest level, rather than because of feeling coerced, guilty, or not knowing why.

The present studies used a variety of methods and data-analytic approaches to examine how autonomy relates to conflict and satisfaction in romantic relationships. These studies, of course, are not without limitations. One limitation is that autonomy was not assessed longitudinally in any of the studies. The designs varied from cross-sectional (Studies 2 and 3) to repeated measures (Study 1) to prior assessment predicting subsequent behavior (Study 4). However, without assessing relationship autonomy repeatedly, bidirectional causality cannot be ruled out. Another limitation is that the majority of participants in Studies 1 and 2 were women. Studies 3 and 4, which were conducted on couples, somewhat alleviate this concern. However, further research is needed to enhance generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, these findings augment research on autonomy in the interpersonal domain. Being aware of one's personal, voluntary endorsement of a relationship may have a number of benefits that have yet to be studied. For example, an interesting aspect of autonomy is that those who feel autonomous are more likely to support autonomy in others (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan et al., 2005). Although autonomy support was not assessed here, the potential implications of supporting the autonomy of one's romantic partner may also play a key role in how disagreements become resolved and how major decisions are negotiated. Second, if autonomy buffers one's perception and interpretation of disagreements in romantic relationships, perhaps it buffers perception of stressful experiences more generally. It seems possible that the same objectively stressful event may be interpreted rather differently depending on one's autonomy at the time, and this may carry over to subsequent well-being and other important outcomes. Finally, future research could benefit from experimental manipulation or priming of relationship autonomy to formally test the causal associations implied here. Such research could provide a better understanding of the underlying processes involved in feeling autonomous, interpretation of and responses to conflict, and pathways to various forms of relationship functioning.

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New Editor Appointed, 2007–2012

The Publications and Communications (P&C) Board of the American Psychological Association announces the appointment of a new editor for a 6-year term beginning in 2007. As of January 1, 2006, manuscripts should be directed as follows:

- *Emotion* (www.apa.org/journals/emo.html), **Elizabeth A. Phelps, PhD**, Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, Room 863, New York, NY 10003.

Electronic manuscript submission. As of January 1, 2006, manuscripts should be submitted electronically via the journal's Manuscript Submission Portal (see the Web site listed above). Authors who are unable to do so should correspond with the editor's office about alternatives.

Manuscript submission patterns make the precise date of completion of the 2006 volumes uncertain. The current editors, Richard J. Davidson, PhD, and Klaus R. Scherer, PhD, will receive and consider manuscripts through December 31, 2005. Should 2006 volumes be completed before that date, manuscripts will be redirected to the new editor for consideration in 2007 volume.