Regulation Processes in Intimate Relationships: The Role of Ideal Standards

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This research investigated the consistency between partner perceptions and ideal standards (ideal–perception consistency) and the partner regulation attempts of 200 individuals involved in relationships (Study 1) and 62 heterosexual couples (Study 2). As predicted, greater regulation attempts were associated with lower ideal–perception consistency, and these links operated within 3 pivotal mate-evaluation dimensions and were moderated by perceived regulation success. Ideal–perception consistency also mediated the relation between partner regulation and relationship quality, and cross-lagged analyses suggested that ideal consistency and regulation influenced each other over time. Finally, stronger partner regulation was generally associated with more negative self-evaluations and more self-regulation by the targeted partner. These novel results support and extend the Ideal Standards Model (J. A. Simpson, G. J. O. Fletcher, & L. Campbell, 2001).

Keywords: partner regulation, relationship improvement, ideal standards, ideal discrepancy

Given the importance that relationships have for psychological and physical well-being, it is no mystery why people are motivated to maintain or improve their long-term intimate relationships (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Indeed, an impressive body of research over the past decade has produced a sizeable list of cognitive tactics that individuals use to sustain their relationships when aspects of their partner are less than ideal. For example, individuals commonly reform their expectations to more closely fit with the reality of their partner (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000a), perceive their partner to more closely resemble their ideal than they actually do (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), and enhance negative partner qualities by associating unfavorable attributes with more virtuous traits (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1999). Such techniques are effective at maintaining relationship satisfaction and security throughout the inevitable ups and downs people experience in their intimate relationships.

Despite the ubiquity and effectiveness of such cognitive maintenance strategies, however, individuals should also be motivated at times to try and change behaviors or characteristics of their partner. Surprisingly, however, partner improvement or regulation attempts have received remarkably little attention from relationship scientists, and we know next to nothing about the consequences of relationship regulation. Drawing upon established theory regarding the motivating conditions underlying regulation attempts, the present research ad-

dresses this gap by analyzing the consequences of partner regulation for partner and relationship evaluations.

Partner Regulation and the Ideal Standards Model

The extensive theoretical and empirical work regarding *self*-regulation provides a beginning point for considering when individuals might be motivated to regulate their partner and the outcome of regulation attempts. The most common starting point for self-regulation models is the proposition that individuals compare the qualities of some feature of the self with a preexisting standard. The discrepancy between perceptions and relevant standards then drives emotions and cognitions and motivates behavior designed to reduce or resolve the discrepancy (see, e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987). Such regulation attempts, and their success, also feed back into and influence the level of consistency between perceptions and associated expectations or standards (see Carver & Scheier, 1998).

A recent theory that applies some basic principles of regulation theory specifically to intimate relationships is the Ideal Standards Model proposed by Fletcher, Simpson, and colleagues (see Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001, for an overview). However, as shall be seen, modeling regulation processes in relationships is far more complex than modeling regulation processes in the self, simply because two people are involved. Thus, for example, the consequences of partner regulation for the self include the way in which both the self *and* the partner perceive and respond to such attempts.[1]

The Ideal Standards Model first proposes that individuals possess chronically accessible mate and relationship ideal standards that predate specific relationships and are used to evaluate both potential mates and partners in existing relationships. The level of

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[1] See Simpson et al. (2001) for a detailed discussion of the similarities and differences between self-discrepancy and relationship-discrepancy models.

consistency between ideal standards and accompanying perceptions (henceforth termed *ideal–perception consistency*) is then postulated to drive evaluative judgments about relationships and to signal any need for regulation. Thus, in ongoing relationships perceptions of the partner are constantly (often automatically) compared with the standards and needs of the perceiver. As already noted, researchers know that individuals are good at forming attributions to write off negative behavior (Fincham, 2001) or to rationalize their partners' negative characteristics (Murray et al., 1996; Murray & Holmes, 1999). Nevertheless, if the partner consistently fails to meet specific standards or needs that are central to the individual, then such discrepancies are likely to be noticed, become difficult to rationalize away, become increasingly irksome, and finally motivate desires and strategies to change the partner and relationship in some way.

What is the origin of the importance attached to particular standards that individuals use in their relationships? At the proximal level, there are likely to be a plethora of factors involved, including recent experiences (such as reading a self-help book, meeting an alternative potential partner, talking to one's partner, undergoing a religious conversion) and self-perceptions of mate value. For example, if Mary perceives herself as attractive or ambitious, she is likely to set high standards for her partner on the same dimensions (Fletcher, 2002).

It is also possible that the content of the key dimensions of mate evaluation has distal origins in terms of human evolution. Informed by Gangestad and Simpson's (2000) strategic pluralism model of human mating, the Ideal Standards Model postulates the existence of three major dimensions that individuals consider when evaluating (and regulating) prospective or current partners: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources. Why are these three categories so important? Evaluating mates on these dimensions could have promoted the reproductive success of our ancestors via two distinct routes—either good investment and/or good genes. The possession of warmth and trustworthiness, for example, may signal the capacity to be a good mate and parent (i.e., the motivation for good investment), whereas either the actual possession of status and resources or the drive to obtain them might signal the ability to provide good investment. In addition, the possession of attractiveness and vitality is likely to be an indicator of good genes, signaling higher fertility and perhaps better long-term health (see Fletcher, 2002, for associated evidence).

There is considerable evidence that, across many cultures, both men and women focus on these particular dimensions when looking for long-term mates (see Buss, 1999; Fletcher, 2002). Factor analytic studies of mate importance ratings also have revealed that most mate-evaluation items fall into these three categories and that this three-dimensional structure replicates well across gender, relationship status, and short-term versus long-term relationship contexts (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004). Because the original factor analytic research was based on items generated from open-ended protocols and responses, the results suggest that these three mate-selection categories are cognitively represented in lay schemas rather than merely existing in the minds and models of evolutionary psychologists (see Fletcher et al., 1999).

To date, research testing the Ideal Standards Model has focused on the evaluation function of ideal standards, revealing (as predicted) that when perceptions of the current partner and relationship more closely match an individual's ideal standards (high ideal–perception consistency), partners and relationships are evaluated more positively (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999, Study 6), and breakup rates are lower (Fletcher et al., 2000a). However, the model's second major postulate—that low consistency between perceptions and ideal standards (low ideal–perception consistency) should be associated with regulation attempts—has not been tested.

The Consequences of Partner Regulation

A central question regarding partner regulation is what implications regulatory efforts have for partner perceptions and relationship evaluations. The kind of cognitive strategies we described previously help to maintain relationship satisfaction by ameliorating discrepancies between partner perceptions and ideal standards. Given that the purpose of regulation attempts is (presumably) to shift partner's qualities closer to the ideal standard, one might plausibly suspect that partner regulation will also normally have positive consequences for the relationship. However, to preview our arguments, we predicted that attempts to change the partner would generally produce negative relationship outcomes for two main reasons. First, regulatory efforts directed toward the partner are likely to increase the salience of any discrepancy between partner attributes and ideal standards. Moreover, regulation attempts will only increase ideal–perception consistency if they are successful at bringing about change in the partner (which might be a difficult enterprise). However, unsuccessful regulation attempts, which may be commonplace, seem likely to amplify dissatisfaction and perceived partner discrepancies. Second, attempts to change the partner may well communicate lack of acceptance and, thus, have negative effects on the way targeted partners view both themselves and their relationship.

We expand on these points and postulate psychological processes next by introducing a series of specific causal models concerning the associations between partner regulation, ideal–perception consistency, regulation success, and relationship quality (see Figure 1).

Model 1: The Impact of Regulation on Ideal–Perception Consistency

Model 1 (Figure 1) suggests that regulation influences ideal–perception consistency. Both the Ideal Standards Model and prior regulation theories propose that regulation is motivated by a lack of consistency between actual perceptions and ideal standards. For example, if Mary places considerable importance on status and resources ideal standards, but perceives her partner John to have limited potential to be financially secure, she may encourage him to retrain or look for another job.

However, the principal motivation behind regulation is to reduce any discrepancy between current perceptions and ideal standards (i.e., Mary wants to change John's status and resources to more closely resemble her ideal). Hence, regulation attempts should feed back into and influence later judgments of ideal–perception consistency. This model exemplifies the feedback loop described in prior accounts of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998) in which individuals continually monitor the level of consistency
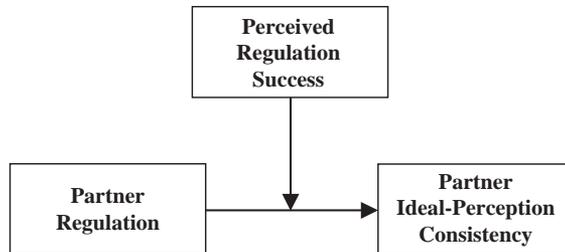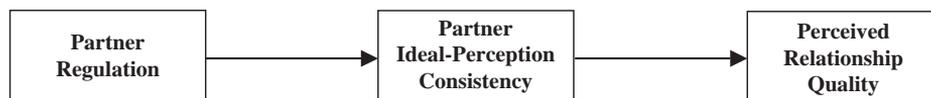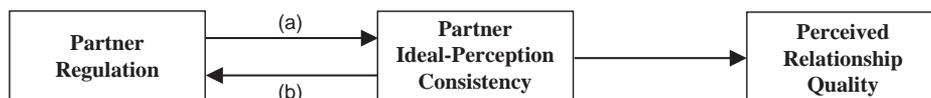
Model 1

Partner Regulation	→	Partner Ideal-Perception Consistency

Model 2

Perceived Regulation Success

Partner Regulation	→	Partner Ideal-Perception Consistency

Model 3

Partner Regulation	→	Partner Ideal-Perception Consistency	→	Perceived Relationship Quality

Model 4

Partner Regulation	(a) → ← (b)	Partner Ideal-Perception Consistency	→	Perceived Relationship Quality

Figure 1. Models of the links between regulation, ideal–perception consistency, and perceived relationship quality.

between perceptions and ideal standards, including any changes in consistency arising from active regulation attempts. Thus, the primary consequence of regulatory behavior is a shift toward or away from a desired endpoint (i.e., goal or ideal).

In the perfect relationship world, the path between partner regulation and ideal–perception consistency would be positive—stronger efforts to change the partner would produce higher ideal–perception consistency. However, changing the partner may not be an easy task. Indeed, consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), the presence of strong regulation behavior may serve to induce or maintain perceptions of low ideal–perception consistency by constantly priming the belief that the partner is not meeting expectations. Moreover, attributes such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and ambitiousness are not easily or rapidly changed in either oneself or in others (Fletcher et al., 2000a). And it seems likely that unproductive partner regulation attempts may typically heighten the sense of dissatisfaction and produce a per-

ception that the partner is even further away from meeting important standards. Thus, it may well be the case that regulation attempts often have negative consequences for partner evaluations. Nevertheless, the size and direction of this path should (in part) depend on the effectiveness of regulation attempts, which brings us to Model 2.

Model 2: Regulation, Regulation Success, and Ideal–Perception Consistency

Model 2 (Figure 1) suggests that the link between regulation and ideal–perception consistency should be moderated by the perceived success of regulation attempts. However, the moderating effect of regulation success is likely to be most marked when regulation efforts are strong. For example, Mary is likely to be more disappointed at a lack of change in John when she has repeatedly discussed with John his education and career options

than she will be when she casually mentions the possibility of a night course (perhaps because her lack of success in the first example signals to Mary that John is disappointingly less ambitious than she initially assumed). Although we expected a main effect of regulation success regardless of level of regulation (i.e., individuals who are less successful should have lower ideal–perception consistency), the negative impact of low regulation success should be experienced more acutely by individuals who are working assiduously to change their partners. Therefore, we expected that individuals who had the lowest levels of ideal–perception consistency would be those who reported substantial efforts to change their partner but who perceived such efforts to be ineffective.

Model 3: Regulation, Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Relationship Quality

Model 3 details how regulation and ideal–perception consistency are tied to perceptions of relationship quality. As described above, and consistent with the Ideal Standards Model, partners who possess lower consistency between their ideal standards and perceptions of their partners hold more negative judgments regarding the quality of their relationship (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000a). We surmised that stronger partner regulation attempts would also be associated with lower perceived relationship quality.

Recall that Models 1 and 2 (see Figure 1) propose that a primary consequence of regulation attempts constitutes the extent to which regulation attempts modify ideal–perception consistency. Indeed, the Ideal Standards Model proposes that ideal–perception consistency judgments are key proximal-level drivers of relationship evaluations. Thus, we propose that partner regulation attempts should influence judgments of relationship quality to the extent that they influence consistency between partner perceptions and associated ideal standards. Accordingly, we predicted that ideal–perception consistency would mediate the relation between partner regulation and relationship quality (see Figure 1, Model 3).

Model 4: Longitudinal Links Between Regulation, Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Relationship Quality

The fourth model (see Figure 1, Model 4) examines how ideal consistency and regulation might influence each other and relationship evaluation over time. The top path (Path a) running between partner regulation and ideal–perception consistency suggests that regulation attempts should influence perceptions of ideal consistency. We also tested the assumption that regulation is motivated by a lack of consistency between current perceptions and ideal standards (as hypothesized by the Ideal Standards Model and prior accounts of regulation; Path b). In summary, we predicted that, over time (a) greater regulation attempts should predict lower judgments of partner ideal–perception consistency and (b) lower partner ideal–perception consistency should predict greater partner regulation attempts.

Finally, Model 4 also portrays how ideal–perception consistency and regulation should impact on later judgments of relationship quality. We predicted that the proximal predictor of relationship quality constitutes the extent to which the partner matches ideal standards (and not levels of partner regulation), consistent with the

assertion that both the primary cause and outcome of regulation is the consistency between perceptions and ideal standards, which in turn influences judgments of relationship quality (also see Model 3).

Impact of Regulation Attempts on the Partner

The models outlined in Figure 1 describe the consequences that partner regulation is likely to have for the individual's perceptions of his or her partner and relationship. A second route by which regulation might produce negative relationship outcomes is the impact that regulatory efforts actually have on the partner. Previous research indicates that lower partner ideal–perception consistency ratings not only predict more negative judgments of relationship quality (in Person a), but simultaneously predict more negative relationship evaluations harbored by Person a's partner (Campbell et al., 2001). This is perhaps not surprising given the multiple ways (verbal and nonverbal, intentional and unintentional) in which individuals communicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding specific traits or behaviors of their partners.

Indeed, one major way in which individuals might assess how they are evaluated by their partner is via their partner's regulatory behavior. For example, if Mary tries to get John to communicate more sensitively, such efforts are likely to be noticed by John. Receiving regulation attempts from Mary might, in turn, cause John to have doubts about his standing on the warmth/trustworthiness dimension. Moreover, even if John stubbornly retains his positive view of himself, he is likely to realize that he does not conform very closely to Mary's expectations. Thus, we predicted that being the target of partner's regulation attempts should lower self-evaluations and/or produce more negative perceptions of how closely the self matches the partner's ideal standards.

These predicted effects are consistent with prior regulation theory and associated research illustrating that individuals do respond to the perceived appraisals and ideal standards of close others (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Leary, 2004; Moretti & Higgins, 1999). In addition, when failing to meet the expectations held by one's partner (as revealed by their regulation attempts) individuals may be motivated to improve discrepancy-related attributes in order to boost their partner's regard. Accordingly, we tested whether experiencing more regulation from the partner was associated with increases in self-regulation attempts.

Research Overview

Across two studies, we tested a series of predictions derived from the Ideal Standards Model (and extensions) that (to our knowledge) have not been subject to prior empirical research. One major aim of these studies was to test our proposal that stronger partner regulation attempts would feed into more negative perceptions of ideal consistency (see Figure 1, Model 1). Although Studies 1 and 2a involved cross-sectional samples, gathering retrospective reports of regulation behavior over the previous 6 months allowed us to (a) test predictions regarding how *past* regulation is associated with current perceptions of ideal-consistency (see Model 1) and (b) test various causal models regarding the impact that regulation and regulation success should

have on ideal–perception consistency and relationship evaluations (Models 2 and 3 of Figure 1).

Study 1 tested these hypotheses with a sample of individuals who were currently involved in heterosexual romantic relationships. In Study 2a, our predictions were tested with a sample of couples, which allowed us to test whether the regulation attempts and ideal–perception consistency of individuals were systematically linked to the relationship evaluations (and other judgments) held by their partners. As described above, we expected that receiving strong regulation attempts from the partner would be associated with more negative self-perceptions and/or increased self-regulatory efforts.

Finally, in an extension of Study 2, we collected longitudinal data to test our predictions that (a) stronger regulation attempts reduce perceptions of ideal–perception consistency over time and also that (b) lower ideal–perception consistency motivates increased regulation attempts (Model 4). In addition, we also assessed relationship quality across time to more rigorously test the proposition that the associations between regulation and relationship quality would be mediated by ideal–perception consistency, but not vice versa (see Models 3 and 4).

Study 1

In Study 1, individuals in heterosexual relationships rated their current partner perceptions, ideal standards, and partner ideal–perception consistency using the short forms of the Partner Ideal Scales developed by Fletcher et al. (1999). For each item, participants also indicated how much they had attempted to change their partner over the past 6 months and how successful any regulation attempts had been.

There were several reasons why we chose to assess these variables in this manner. First, actual attempts to regulate the partner can only sensibly be reported over past periods of time (rather than the present). Thus, to avoid ambiguity we specified a 6-month period. Second, one of the aims of this research was to examine the impact of regulation and perceived regulation success. Evaluating the success of regulation attempts is likely to involve an examination of how qualities have changed over time. Accordingly, we measured self-reports of regulation attempts conducted over the past 6 months and current perceptions of ideal consistency. Consequently, for these data the causal path runs from regulation to ideal–perception consistency (Model 1, Figure 1), allowing tests of the moderating role of regulation success (see Model 2) and the mediation model outlined in Model 3.

We tested three main hypotheses. First, we expected that there would be moderately large negative correlations between partner regulation attempts and ideal–perception consistency (see Model 1, Figure 1). In addition, we predicted these links would be domain specific. Greater regulation of attributes on one ideal dimension (e.g., warmth/trustworthiness) should influence perceptions of partner attributes relevant to that dimension (e.g., sensitive and caring) but not attributes associated with other ideal dimensions (e.g., characteristics related to attractiveness/vitality and/or status/resources).

Second, the strength of the relation between regulation attempts and ideal–perception consistency would be moderated by the perceived success of regulation (Model 2). For example, if individuals have been unsuccessful in their regulation attempts over the past 6

months, their ideal–perception consistency should be lower. This tendency, however, should be most marked for individuals who have tried especially hard to change their partner.

Third, stronger partner regulation should be associated with lower relationship quality, but this link should be mediated by ideal–perception consistency (Model 3). Specifically, stronger regulation attempts in the past 6 months should predict lower current ideal–perception consistency, which in turn should predict more negative perceptions of relationship quality.

Method

Participants

One hundred men and 100 women currently involved in a romantic relationship of at least 6 months duration were recruited through university laboratory classes or poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Participants ranged from 18 to 51 years of age, with a mean age of 23.22 years ($SD = 6.10$). Of the sample, 52 participants were living with their partner and 30 were married. Of the remaining participants, 78 reported their relationship as serious, 36 as steady, and 4 as casual. The mean length of relationships was 33.81 months ($SD = 47.83$ months).

Measurement Strategy and Psychometric Analyses

All of the primary measures were constructed from the short forms of the Partner Ideal Scales. These scales have demonstrated good internal reliability, test–retest reliability, and convergent and predictive validity when used to assess the importance of partner ideal standards, and they comprise three distinct factors (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999, 2000a, 2004). The specific scale items for the three mate ideal dimensions were warmth/trustworthiness ("understanding," "supportive," "kind," "good listener," "sensitive," and "considerate"), attractiveness/vitality ("sexy," "nice body," "attractive appearance," "good lover," "outgoing," and "adventurous"), and status/resources ("successful," "nice house," "financially secure," "dresses well," and "good job"). The phrase "potential to achieve" was added to the items from the third ideal dimension (e.g., financially secure [or potential to achieve]).

These same 17[2] partner characteristics were used to create the following five scales: (a) Partner Ideal Standards, (b) Perceptions of Actual Partner Qualities, (c) Consistency Between Partner Perceptions and Ideal Standards, (d) Actual Attempts to Change the Partner, and (e) Perceived Success of Partner Regulation Attempts. Tests of factorial structure using confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the items for all scales formed three quasi-independent factors representing the three mate ideal dimensions (see Fletcher et al., 2004).[3] The items for each ideal dimension were

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[2] A single intelligence item was also included in all scales. Consistent with previous research (Fletcher et al., 1999), the intelligence item loaded equally across all three ideal dimensions, and it was therefore analyzed separately. Because this item did not produce significant results when controlling for items on the other ideal dimensions, these results are not reported.

[3] Using confirmatory factor analysis, a three-factor model (representing the three mate ideal dimensions) was tested and compared with a one-factor model. For all five scales, the three-factor model produced a good fit, $\chi^2(25, N = 200) = 50.45$ to 70.83, $ps < .05$, comparative fit indices (CFIs) = .93 to .97, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEAs) = .07 to .10, and a significantly better fit, $\Delta\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 120.61$ to 415.10, $ps < .001$, than did the one-factor model, which uniformly fit the data poorly, $\chi^2(27, N = 200) = 191.44$ to 470.05, $ps < .001$, CFIs = .53 to .75, RMSEAs = .17 to .29.

also internally consistent within each scale, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .63 to .88 (see Table 1). Consequently, for each of the following measures, items within each dimension were summed and averaged to provide single indexes for each ideal dimension.

Ideal standards. Participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of the importance that it assumed in describing their ideal partner in a close relationship (dating, living together, or married; 1 = *very unimportant*, 7 = *very important*). Higher scores reflect higher expectations for an individual's ideal partner.

Partner perceptions. Participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of how accurately it described their current romantic partner (1 = *not at all like my partner*, 7 = *very much like my partner*), with higher scores revealing more positive partner perceptions.

Ideal–perception consistency. Participants were asked to compare their current partner with their expectations regarding their ideal partner. Participants rated each attribute according to the degree to which their current romantic partner matched their ideal partner (1 = *does not match my ideal at all*, 7 = *completely matches my ideal*). Higher scores indicate greater consistency between an individual's partner ideal standards and his or her partner perceptions. This methodology has produced valid and reliable results in prior research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001).[4]

Regulation and perceived regulation success. For each attribute, participants also rated the extent to which they (a) had desired change in that aspect of their partner during the past 6 months (1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*), (b) had tried in some way to change that aspect of their partner during the past 6 months (1 = *not tried at all to change*, 7 = *tried hard to change*), and (c) were successful in any attempts to change that aspect of their partner (1 = *attempts have not been successful*, 7 = *attempts have been successful*). Higher scores represent stronger desires and efforts to change and higher perceived success in changing attributes or behaviors. If participants had not tried to change a particular aspect of their partner (i.e., they reported 1 for Question 2 above), they were instructed to report 1 for Question 3 regarding how successful regulation attempts have been. Individuals who reported zero regulation attempts for a particular ideal dimension were subsequently excluded from all of the analyses involving regulation success.[5]

Relationship quality. The short version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000b) was used to assess relationship quality. This scale has good internal reliability and predictive validity (Fletcher et al., 2000a, 2000b). The short version consists of the seven items that most directly tap each component of relationship quality that the inventory was designed to measure: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance (e.g., "how satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Participants were asked to rate each item with reference to their current romantic relationship (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). All items were summed and averaged to provide an overall index of relationship quality, with higher scores indicating greater perceived quality. This measure had good internal reliability (Cronbach's α = .83).

Procedure

Participants completed the entire set of questionnaires individually or in same-sex groups of 2–3 people. Participants were first provided with general information about the study, assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of all information, and informed they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Both written and verbal instructions were provided to ensure the accurate completion of all scales, and participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires in sequence without reviewing previous answers. Once consent was obtained, participants were asked to provide their gender, age, relationship status, and length of current relationship. Participants then completed the PRQC Inventory, followed by the

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients of All Scales (Study 1)

Variable	Total		
	M	SD	IR
Partner ideal standards			
Warmth/trustworthiness	6.00	0.73	.85
Attractiveness/vitality	4.85	0.87	.75
Status/resources	4.50	1.19	.84
Partner perceptions			
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.60	0.94	.86
Attractiveness/vitality	5.35	0.85	.72
Status/resources	5.29	1.07	.82
Partner ideal–perception consistency			
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.68	0.99	.88
Attractiveness/vitality	5.47	0.95	.79
Status/resources	5.53	1.10	.86
Partner regulation			
Warmth/trustworthiness	2.46	1.22	.81
Attractiveness/vitality	2.24	1.10	.72
Status/resources	2.30	1.30	.77
Partner regulation success[a]			
Warmth/trustworthiness (N = 174)	2.74	1.10	.70
Attractiveness/vitality (N = 172)	2.37	1.05	.65
Status/resources (N = 155)	2.65	1.21	.63
Relationship quality	5.81	0.77	.83

Note. Internal reliability (IR) was measured with Cronbach alphas.
[a] Descriptive data regarding success of regulation attempts only include participants who reported actually attempting to change their partner on specific ideal dimensions. Thus, the sample sizes vary across dimensions for these analyses.

scales described above concerning ideal standards, perceptions, ideal–perception consistency, and regulation.[6] The order in which these scales were presented was counterbalanced within each gender so that half of the sample answered the scales assessing ideal standards, perceptions and

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[4] Because participants completed separate scales rating the importance of ideal standards as well as ratings of actual partner perceptions, we were able to calculate a second indirect measure of ideal–perception consistency by regressing mean levels of perceptions on mean levels of ideal standards for each ideal dimension. The standardized residuals from this regression were then treated as an index of ideal–perception consistency, with more negative residuals representing a greater discrepancy between current perceptions and ideal standards relative to the sample. All of the analyses presented in Studies 1 and 2a were run with this indirect measure, producing very similar results to those reported here. (For an example of this approach, see Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, and Patrick, 2001.)

[5] We have reported only the results with ratings of actual attempts to change. However, all of the analyses in Study 1 and Study 2 were run with desired change as the predictor variable (in place of regulation attempts) producing essentially identical results to those reported. However, participants consistently reported a stronger desire for change than actual attempts to change the partner, and desired change generally exhibited stronger links with ideal–perception consistency. This suggests that desire for change does not always generate efforts to improve the partner, but it nonetheless influences perceptions of ideal consistency and relationship quality.

[6] At this point, participants also completed some additional questionnaires that are not germane to the current study. Hence, they are not described.

ideal–perception consistency before the scales assessing regulation and regulation success.[7]

Results

Means, standard deviations, and internal reliabilities for all scales are shown in Table 1. All scales showed adequate internal reliability and variances, and the means for partner ideal standards, perceptions, and ideal–perception consistency were similar to those reported in prior research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 2000a). As is typical for such samples, participants reported high levels of relationship quality. Nonetheless, the key variable of regulation attempts revealed reasonable levels of variance, with the bulk of participants (98% of sample) reporting attempts to change some aspect of their partner in the past 6 months.

Links Between Regulation and Ideal–Perception Consistency

As predicted, across the three ideal dimensions, individuals who reported more attempts to change their partner in the past 6 months perceived lower consistency between their partner perceptions and their ideal standards ($rs = -.35$ to $-.59$, $ps < .05$). However, the pattern of negative correlations could reflect overall evaluative or halo effects. To control for overall evaluation, we calculated each coefficient controlling for the ideal–perception consistency responses obtained for the other two ideal dimensions. The resulting regression coefficients are displayed in Table 2 (see Study 1 in Table 2). As can be seen, all of the within-dimension associations between regulation and ideal–perception consistency remained significant. These results illustrate that the links between regulation and ideal–perception consistency are funneled through specific ideal domains rather than via global, higher order perceptions of mate value. Thus, regulation of specific partner qualities is associated with evaluations of those particular qualities and not other attributes or global perceptions of the degree to which the partner is matching ideal standards.

Another alternative explanation is that the association between regulation and ideal–perception consistency is simply produced by more negative perceptions of the partner within each dimension (as opposed to the discrepancy between perceptions and ideal standards). Recall that we collected ratings of actual partner perceptions across the three ideal dimensions. Thus, we were able to rule out this possible explanation by regressing regulation attempts on both ideal–perception consistency and actual perceptions simultaneously. For all three ideal dimensions, ideal–perception consistency remained a significant predictor of regulation attempts ($\beta s = -.26$ to $-.60$, $ps < .05$). In contrast, only attractiveness/vitality partner perceptions remained associated with regulation when ideal–perception consistency was controlled ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$) and perceptions failed to predict regulation on the other two ideal dimensions ($\beta s = .02$ and $-.07$ for warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources, respectively).

Finally, consistent with prior theory and research advocating the motivating influence of goals, perhaps the associations shown in Table 2 are due to the importance attached to ideal standards within each dimension. For example, individuals who possess strong intimacy goals engage in relationship activities and conflict

Table 2

Regression Coefficients Between Partner Ideal–Perception Consistency and Partner Regulation Attempts

Ideal dimension	Study 1	Study 2a	
		Women	Men
Warmth/trustworthiness	−.64*	−.46*	−.57*
Attractiveness/vitality	−.47*	−.42*	−.47*
Status/resources	−.29*	−.17*	−.20*

Note. All coefficients control for ideal–perception consistency across the two other ideal dimensions. In Study 2a, coefficients also controlled for the associations across self- and partner regulation within the specific ideal dimension, and all paths are pooled across gender (see Footnote 12).
* $p < .05$.

management strategies that promote intimacy within the relationship (e.g., Sanderson & Cantor, 2001; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). Thus, individuals with higher ideals may work harder to attain their high standards and/or requiring change of specific partner qualities may increase the importance attached to discrepancy-related attributes. To rule out this possible explanation, we regressed regulation attempts on both ideal–perception consistency and ideal standards simultaneously. For all three ideal dimensions, ideal–perception consistency remained a significant predictor of regulation attempts ($\beta s = -.37$ to $-.59$, $ps < .05$) and in all cases, was a stronger predictor than the importance attached to ideal standards ($\beta s = .01$ to $.24$).

These results (controlling for perceptions and ideal standards) provide substantive evidence that regulation is linked with the extent to which perceptions match ideal standards and not simply with how positively or negatively self and partner are viewed or the importance attached to the qualities within each dimension. [8]

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[7] To examine whether order produced any mean differences across the main variables, we ran a series of 3 (ratings across all three ideal dimensions) × 2 (receiving perceptions–ideal consistency vs. regulation scales first) analyses of variance with the first factor as repeated measures. No main or interaction effects for order were significant.

[8] In our general treatment of regulation processes, we have proposed that regulation behavior is associated with perceiving the partner as falling short of ideal standards. Can peoples' perceptions exceed their ideal standards and is this type of inconsistency related to regulation? To examine this, we created groups consisting of participants (a) whose perception ratings fell below the importance attached to associated ideal standards and (b) whose perceptions matched or exceeded the relevant ideal ratings. As expected, participants whose partner perceptions matched or exceeded the importance placed on each dimension had significantly higher ideal–perception consistency ratings ($Ms = 5.80$ to 6.30) than those individuals whose perception ratings fell below ideals ($Ms = 4.64$ to 5.29) $ts(198) = 7.01$ to 8.31, $ps < .05$. As established in the prior analyses, individuals who have high ideal–perception consistency are those who have exhibited very low regulation attempts. To explore this further, we regressed regulation attempts on ideal standards, partner perceptions, the grouping variable, and all possible two-way and three-way interactions. Examination of significant interactions revealed that when participants whose perceptions were below ideal ratings reported higher regulation attempts, the lower their partner perceptions and the higher their ideal

Table 3
Regression Coefficients for All Dimensions Testing Whether Regulation Success Moderated the Links Between Regulation Attempts and Ideal–Perception Consistency

	Partner ideal–perception consistency				
	Study 1		Study 2a		
Partner regulation and regulation success	N	Both	N	Women	Men
Warmth/trustworthiness	174		46		
Partner regulation		−.88*		−.62*	−.77*
Regulation success		.47*		.34*	.39*
Interaction		.90*		.28*	.26*
Attractiveness/vitality	172		44		
Partner regulation		−.75*		−.87*	−.88*
Regulation success		.52*		.42*	.41*
Interaction		.35		*33**	*23*
Status/resources	155		40		
Partner regulation		−.70*		−.26†	−.35†
Regulation success		.57*		.06	.10
Interaction		.99*		.06	.08

Note. Main effects have been calculated without the interaction. Analyses for Study 1 only include participants who reported regulation attempts for the specific ideal dimension. Analyses for Study 2a only include couples who both reported regulation attempts for the specific ideal dimension. The path coefficients for Study 2a are pooled across men and women (see Footnote 12), except paths that were significantly different across gender (shown in italics).
† $p < .10$.   * $p < .05$.

Does Perceived Regulation Success Moderate the Link Between Regulation and Ideal–Perception Consistency?

As shown in Model 2 (see Figure 1), we hypothesized that the relation between regulation and ideal–perception consistency would be moderated by perceived regulation success. In other words, individuals who have tried harder to change their partner in the previous 6 months should generally have lower levels of ideal–perception consistency, but this pattern should be more pronounced for those who have been less successful in their regulation attempts.

To test these predictions, we performed hierarchical regression analyses separately for each ideal dimension with ideal–perception consistency as the dependent variable. In the first step of each analysis, regulation and perceived success of regulation were entered as predictors, after which the interaction term was entered in Step 2. Only data from those individuals who reported actually attempting at least some regulation with respect to specific ideal dimensions were included in each analysis. Table 3 displays the standardized regression coefficients for each ideal dimension (see Study 1 of Table 3).

The main effects for partner regulation attempts were significant for each ideal dimension, revealing that the more individuals tried to change their partners, the less they perceived their partners as meeting their ideal standards. The main effects for perceived

standards (as predicted). However, participants whose partners exceeded their ideal standards reported the same (relatively low) levels of regulation regardless of high versus low perceptions or high versus low ideal standards (see Murray et al., 2005, for an example of this kind of approach). Thus, most of the regulatory action is occurring in the context of partner perceptions falling short of ideal standards.

regulation success were also significant for all three dimensions, indicating that individuals who perceived their regulation attempts as more successful perceived relatively higher ideal–perception consistency. Finally, just as predicted, the interaction between partner regulation attempts and perceived regulation success was significant for the warmth/trustworthiness and the status/resources dimensions.

These interactions were consistent across the two ideal dimensions and are illustrated in Figure 2. Although more strenuous efforts to change the partner were typically associated with lower ideal–perception consistency, this trend was more marked for individuals who were less successful in accomplishing change.

Does Ideal–Perception Consistency Mediate the Link Between Partner Regulation and Relationship Quality?

We predicted that ideal–perception consistency would mediate the link between partner regulation and relationship quality (see Figure 1, Model 3). In order to demonstrate mediation, four conditions must be met (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). First, partner regulation must be significantly associated with perceived relationship quality. Second, partner regulation must be significantly associated with partner ideal–perception consistency. Third, partner ideal consistency must be significantly associated with relationship quality when controlling for regulation attempts. Finally, the size of the path from partner regulation to perceived relationship quality should be significantly reduced when partner ideal–perception consistency is controlled.

We tested the mediation model with reports of partner regulation attempts across all three ideal dimensions. The results of the path analyses using multiple regression are shown in Figure 3. Solid support was marshaled for our mediation model across all three dimensions. In all cases, more effortful attempts to regulate
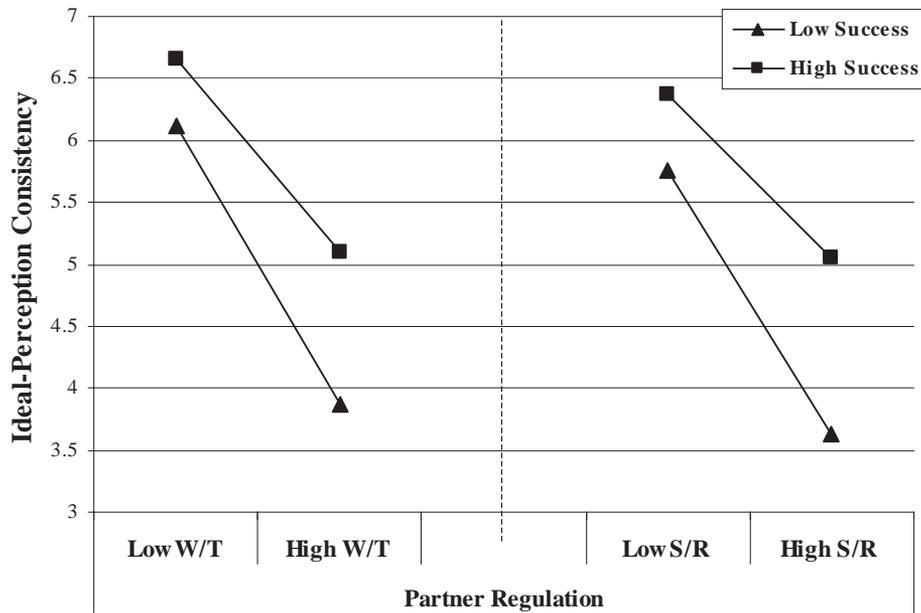
Figure 2. Interaction of partner regulation and regulation success on the warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources dimensions, Study 1. W/T = warmth/trustworthiness and S/R = status/resources. Low scores are 1 standard deviation below the mean; high scores are 1 standard deviation above the mean.

the partner during the prior 6 months predicted lower partner ideal–perception consistency, which in turn fed into more negative perceptions of relationship quality. Moreover, the indirect effect (equivalent to the drop in the direct path between regulation attempts and relationship quality when the mediating variable is controlled) was significant in all cases ($zs = -3.64$ to -6.10, $ps < .01$).[9]

To rule out potential artifacts, we recalculated the mediation models sequentially controlling for relationship length, relationship seriousness, and gender. None of the direct or indirect paths changed in their levels of significance, and the size of the paths altered very little. In addition, as when examining the direct links between regulation and ideal–perception consistency, we recalculated all of the mediation models partialing out (a) partner perceptions and (b) ideal standards. Although the size of the paths were generally reduced, the direct effects between ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality remained positive and significant ($βs = .24$ to $.33$, $ps < .05$), with one exception: The association between warmth/trustworthiness ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality fell below significance when controlling for partner perceptions ($β = .11$). These results provide further support for the impact of ideal–perception consistency on relationship perceptions beyond positive or negative evaluations of the partner or how important partner attributes are viewed.

Regulation, Regulation Success, Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Relationship Quality

Finally, as presented previously (see Table 3 and Figure 2), perceiving regulation attempts as unsuccessful amplified the negative impact of regulation on ideal–perception consistency. Thus, perceiving regulation as unsuccessful should also negatively influence relationship quality but, as with regulation attempts, do so via

the effect regulation success has on ideal–perception consistency. To test this prediction, we repeated the above mediation analyses but entered both partner regulation and perceived regulation success as predictor variables (including only those participants who reported partner regulation; see Table 3). As predicted, both partner regulation ($βs = -.27$ to $-.47$, $ps < .05$) and regulation success ($βs = .21$ to $.33$, $ps < .10$) predicted relationship quality across ideal dimensions. Also as predicted, when adding ideal–perception consistency into the model, across ideal dimensions (a) partner regulation ($βs = -.70$ to $-.88$, $ps < .05$) and regulation success ($βs = .47$ to $.57$, $ps < .05$) significantly predicted ideal–perception consistency, (b) ideal–perception consistency significantly predicted relationship quality ($βs = .33$ to $.42$, $ps < .05$), and (c) the direct paths between relationship quality and partner regulation ($βs = .02$ to $-.23$, $ps > .05$) and regulation success ($βs = .01$ to $.16$, $ps > .05$) were significantly reduced ($zs = 3.43$ to 5.65, $ps < .01$).

We then added the interaction term between partner regulation and regulation success into the model. The interaction significantly predicted relationship quality in the same way as with ideal–perception consistency (see Figure 2) for the warmth/trustworthiness ($p < .10$) and the status/resources ($p < .05$) dimensions (see Table 3). However, as before, the direct associations were reduced below significance when controlling for ideal–perception consistency ($zs = 2.93$ and 3.26, $ps < .05$). Thus, when controlling for

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[9] Note that the initial path between status/resources partner regulation and relationship quality was not statistically significant, although it was in the predicted direction ($r = -.11$). Even though this violates one of the conditions for mediation, we included this model in Figure 3 for the sake of completeness. In addition, when we controlled for ideal–perception consistency this path was significantly reduced ($z = 3.64$, $p < .01$).
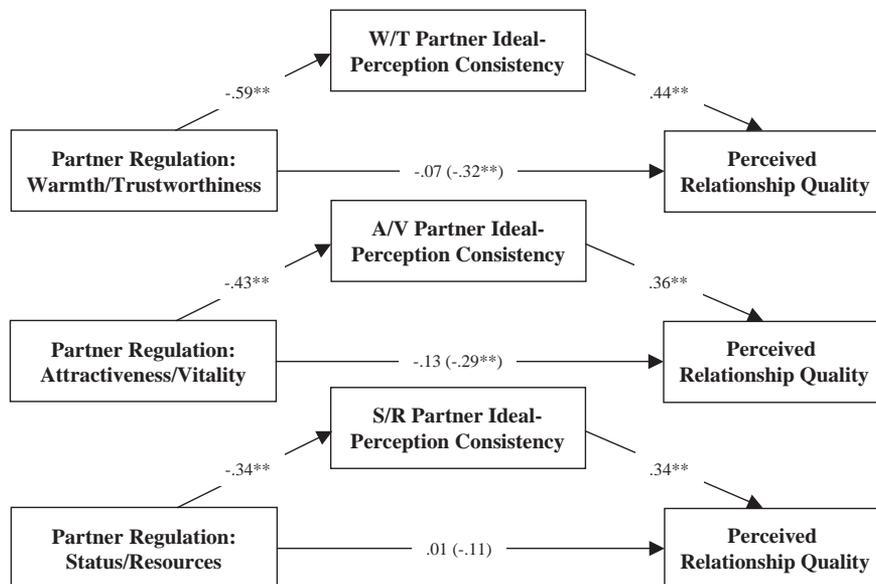
Figure 3. Models show ideal–perception consistency mediating the path between partner regulation and perceived relationship quality, Study 1. Values are standardized regression coefficients. Coefficients when partner ideal–perception consistency is not controlled are shown in parentheses. W/T = warmth/trustworthiness, AV = attractiveness/vitality, and S/R = status/resources. **$p < .01$.

level of partner regulation attempts, we found that perceiving regulation as unsuccessful was associated with more negative judgments of relationship quality (particularly when exerting strong efforts to change the partner), but this effect occurred because unsuccessful regulation attempts reduced ideal–perception consistency.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 provide compelling evidence for the proposed regulation processes developed from the Ideal Standards Model. We found strong connections between partner regulation attempts and perceived consistency with ideal standards within all three ideal dimensions. It is important to note that these links were domain specific, such that more partner regulation on one ideal dimension (e.g., warmth/trustworthiness) was associated with lower partner ideal–perception consistency on the same ideal dimension and not the other dimensions (e.g., attractiveness/vitality or status/resources). In addition, these effects were not attributable to how positively or negatively the partner was perceived in a given domain or to the importance attached to the qualities within each dimension.

We also tested and found provisional support for the proposed causal models regarding the consequences of regulation behavior (see Figure 1, Models 1 through 3). Across ideal dimensions, lower perceived regulation success during the prior 6 months was associated with lower partner ideal consistency. Beyond this main effect, however, the perceived success of warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources regulation attempts generally moderated the relation between regulation and ideal consistency (Model 2). More specifically, individuals who tried harder to change the partner yet

were unsuccessful reported the lowest perceptions of ideal consistency.

The final model we tested proposed that ideal–perception consistency should mediate the relation between partner regulation and perceived relationship quality (Model 3). This model was strongly supported across all three ideal dimensions. More fervent partner regulation attempts during the previous 6 months (particularly if perceived as unsuccessful) were associated with lower partner ideal–perception consistency, which in turn predicted lower judgments of relationship quality.

In general, the results of Study 1 confirmed our predictions. However, Study 1 examined individuals rather than romantic couples, meaning that relationship-level processes that might be critical to understanding regulation within this context could not be investigated. Study 2a sought to redress this limitation by investigating how regulation processes operate within relationship dyads.

Study 2a

In Study 2a, partners involved in romantic relationships completed the same questionnaires used in Study 1. Assessing regulation and ideal–perception consistency with both members of a couple allowed us to test (and replicate) the within-partner associations found in Study 1 (e.g., the link between partner ideal–perception consistency and perceived relationship quality) but also enabled us to examine associations across partners (e.g., the link between men's partner ideal consistency and women's perceived relationship quality). Thus, Study 2a had two major objectives: (a) to replicate the effects found in Study 1 and (b) to test for partner effects across regulation, ideal–perception consistency, and perceived relationship quality.

Replicating Study 1 Findings

The predictions for actor effects (i.e., the effect that an individual's independent variable score has on his or her dependent variable score in an analysis, controlling for the partner's independent variable score) were the same as Study 1. Guided by the Ideal Standards Model, we first predicted that stronger regulation attempts should be associated with lower ideal–perception consistency (see Figure 1, Model 1). However, we also expected that these effects would be channeled through each ideal dimension rather than be driven by global evaluative judgments. Second, we predicted that regulation success should moderate the link between regulation attempts and ideal–perception consistency (see Figure 1, Model 2). Third, we predicted that greater partner regulation should predict lower perceived relationship quality but that this association would be mediated by ideal–perception consistency (see Figure 1, Model 3).

Partner Effects

We also predicted several partner effects. A partner effect is evident when the partner's independent variable score predicts the actor's dependent variable score, controlling for the actor's independent variable score. Campbell et al. (2001), for example, have shown that lower partner ideal–perception consistency for one partner is associated with more negative relationship quality perceived by the other partner. We expected to find the same partner effect in this research, but we also wanted to test the extent to which regulation received from the partner (i.e., being the target of the partner's regulation attempts) is related to self-judgments and regulation. As described previously, we had three main predictions. We expected that receiving strong regulation attempts from the partner would (a) reduce the extent to which individuals believed they possessed the targeted qualities (self-perceptions), (b) lower the degree to which individuals perceived they matched their partner's ideal standards (a new variable we call *inferred ideal–perception consistency*), and (c) increase the efforts individuals applied to improving targeted self-attributes (self-regulation). We tested these hypotheses using structural equation modeling and predicted that we would find the same kind of domain specificity with partner effects as were demonstrated for actor effects in Study 1.

Perceptions of Partner's Regulation

In addition to examining the links between regulation reported by one partner and the judgments made by the targeted partner, we also tested the above three predictions examining participants' perceptions of their partner's regulation. Whether John's perceptions and behavior are influenced by Mary's regulatory efforts will depend upon whether John is aware of her partner regulation attempts. Previous research has found a multitude of ways in which partners try to influence each other, including direct tactics such as coercion and rational reasoning and indirect tactics such as manipulation and supplication (e.g., Bui, Raven, & Schwarzwald, 1994; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). Some types of regulation attempts, such as more direct strategies, may be more obvious to the partner, and other strategies may not be perceived by one or

either partner as actual attempts to change (e.g., an objective two-sided discussion).

Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that perceptions of partner's behavior (beyond the actual behavior reported by the partner) can have important effects on self. For example, Gable, Reis, and Downey (2003) explored the effects of partner's behavior that individuals accurately detected (e.g., perceiving regulation behavior that the partner reports enacting), falsely detected (e.g., perceiving regulation behavior that is not reported by partner), or missed (e.g., not perceiving regulation behavior that the partner reports enacting). Examining daily records of both partners over a 28-day period, Gable et al. found that perceiving negative behavior from the partner (such as criticizing) was associated with reductions in mood and relationship evaluations regardless of whether the behavior was accurately or falsely detected.

Other research also supports the importance of perceptions of partner's behavior. For example, Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (2000) found that perceiving support from the partner reduced adjustment toward a stressor (quite the opposite of the intentions behind support behavior). However, partner's reports of support provision increased coping, suggesting that support is best when it is given but not perceived (i.e., missed). Thus, the effects of partner's regulation attempts on self-perceptions and behavior may depend (to a large degree) on the extent or the way that those attempts are perceived. Accordingly, we also measured and tested the associations between *perceptions* of the regulation attempts received from one's partner and individuals' (a) self-perceptions, (b) inferences regarding self in comparison to partner's ideal standards, and (c) self-regulatory efforts.

Method

Participants

Sixty-two couples involved in heterosexual romantic relationships for a minimum of 6 months were recruited via poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury. Women ranged from 18 to 43 years of age ($M = 23.10$, $SD = 4.96$) and men ranged from 18 to 49 years of age ($M = 23.80$, $SD = 5.75$). Of the sample, 28 couples were living together and 10 were married. Of the remaining couples, 16 reported their relationship as serious and 8 as steady. The mean length of the relationships was 33.90 months ($SD = 33.65$ months).

Scales and Psychometric Analyses

Both partners of each couple completed the same scales as in Study 1 along with five additional measures that were developed to assess (a) self-perceptions, (b) inferred ideal–perception consistency, (c) self-ideal–perception consistency, (d) self-regulation, and (e) perceptions of partners' regulation. These measures were included to test the associations across partners outlined above and to enable the elimination of alternative explanations of these effects.

Self-perceptions. Participants were asked to rate each attribute from the Partner Ideal Scales (see Study 1) in terms of how accurately it described them (1 = *not at all like myself*, 7 = *very much like myself*). Higher scores reflect more positive self-perceptions.

Inferred ideal–perception consistency. Participants rated each attribute from the Partner Ideal Scales in terms of the extent to which they believed they matched their partner's ideal (1 = *I do not match my partner's ideal at all*, 7 = *I completely match my partner's ideal*). Higher scores reveal more positive perceptions that the self matches the ideal standards held by the partner.

Self-ideal–perception consistency. Participants rated each attribute according to the degree to which their current self matched their expectations regarding their ideal self (1 = *do not match my ideal at all*, 7 = *completely match my ideal*). Higher scores indicate greater consistency between an individual's self-ideal standards and his or her self-perceptions.

Self-regulation. For each attribute, participants also rated the extent to which they had tried in some way to change that aspect of themselves during the past 6 months (1 = *not tried at all to change*, 7 = *tried hard to change*), with higher scores reflecting stronger efforts to change self-attributes.

Perceptions of partner's regulation. Participants also rated each attribute according to the extent to which they had received regulation attempts from their partner. Specifically, participants were asked to "rate the extent to which your partner has actually tried in some way to change (or attempted to get you to change) this aspect of you over the last six months" (1 = *not tried at all to change*, 7 = *tried hard to change*). Higher scores represent stronger perceived regulation attempts received from partner.

As with Study 1, confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the three-factor structure (representing the three ideal dimensions) of all scales,[10] and the items within each dimension were internally consistent for each scale (Cronbach's alphas ranged from .66 to .92; shown in Table 4). Consequently, for each measure, items within each dimension were summed and averaged to provide single indexes for each dimension.

The PRQC Scale was used to measure perceived relationship quality (see Study 1). As before, the PRQC Scales had good internal reliability for both men and women (see Table 4). Finally, participants also completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale in order to control for overall self-evaluation across analyses. This scale assesses global feelings of self-worth. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with a series of 10 statements about themselves (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Items were keyed so that higher scores indicated higher self-esteem, and the items were then averaged to form an overall self-esteem score. The scale had good internal consistency (see Table 4).

Procedure

The general procedures and order of questionnaires paralleled Study 1. Participants first provided background information and completed the PRQC and Self-Esteem Scales, followed by the regulation and ideal–perception consistency measures. Half of the sample completed the scales regarding the self prior to the scales regarding the partner, and half of the sample completed the scales assessing perceptions, ideal standards, and ideal–perception consistency before the scales concerning regulation and regulation success.[11] Partners completed the questionnaires in separate rooms, after which they engaged in videotaped discussions (not reported here). At the conclusion of the study, each couple was debriefed, paid $40 for their participation, and entered into a $50 cash draw.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and internal reliabilities for all scales are shown in Table 4. The means of the scales were similar to both those in Study 1 and those reported in prior research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 2000a). As in Study 1, the majority of participants (94%) reported attempting to change some aspect of their partner, and all participants reported attempting to change some aspect of the self over the prior 6 months.

Replicating the Links Between Regulation and Ideal–Perception Consistency

We expected to replicate the findings from Study 1, which showed that stronger attempts to change the partner were associ-

ated with lower partner ideal–perception consistency. Because we used couples, rather than individuals as in Study 1, we used the EQS structural equation modeling (SEM) program (Bentler, 1995) to test all of our predictions. Using SEM allowed us to (a) test both partners simultaneously, (b) control for the associations in the variables across partners, and (c) control for a number of potential artifacts. An example of this analysis strategy is illustrated in Figure 4 displaying the links between partner regulation and partner ideal–perception consistency.

We expected that the within-individual paths running from partner regulation to partner ideal–perception consistency would be negative and significant. In this set of analyses, however, we did not expect that the cross-partner paths (e.g., women's partner regulation to men's partner ideal–perception consistency) would produce significant effects. Nevertheless, the inclusion of all paths, as well as the double-headed arrow controlling the initial associations between women's and men's partner regulation, ensured that the within-individual paths were calculated with all associations across partners controlled.

Equivalent analyses were run across all three ideal dimensions. Following the strategy described in Study 1, these models were run while partialing out ideal–perception consistency ratings for the two other ideal dimensions to control for overall partner evaluation and test whether regulation is channeled through specific mate value dimensions. Furthermore, in this study we collected ratings of individuals' self-directed regulation attempts. Not surprisingly, participants' levels of self-regulation and partner regulation were correlated within ideal dimensions (rs = .27 to .53, ps < .05). Thus, we calculated the models while also partialing out self-regulation within the specific ideal dimension to control for the overall tendency to regulate these qualities within the relationship. In addition, all paths were pooled across gender (e.g., constraining the path between women's partner regulation and partner ideal–perception consistency to be equal to the equivalent path for men). Lagrange multiplier (LM) tests revealed there were no significant differences in the paths across gender, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.01$ to 2.13, ps > .05.[12]

The SEM coefficients for the within-individual paths between partner regulation and partner ideal–perception consistency are presented in Table 2 (see right hand columns). As predicted, for both men and women, across ideal dimensions, individuals who reported greater attempts to change their partner perceived lower consistency between their perceptions of these qualities in their partner and their ideal standards for these attributes.

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[10] Replicating Study 1, for all 10 scales, a three-factor model (representing the three ideal dimensions) produced a good fit, $\chi^2(25, N = 62) = 22.69$ to 58.66, ps = .75 to <.01, CFIs = .88 to 1.00, RMSEAs = .00 to .14, and a significantly better fit, $\Delta\chi^2(2, N = 62) = 36.47$ to 134.02, ps < .001, than a one-factor model, which consistently demonstrated poor fit, $\chi^2(27, N = 62) = 59.85$ to 166.37, ps <.01, CFIs = .44 to .84, RMSEAs = .14 to .29.

[11] As in Study 1, order effects were tested. A small number of effects were significant (3 out of a total 20 possible main effects) but were not theoretically meaningful.

[12] Note that although the paths were constrained to be equal across men and women, the standardized path coefficients reported can differ slightly due to gender differences in the variances of the measures.

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients of All Scales (Study 2a)

Variable	Women		Men		Women IR	Men IR
	M	SD	M	SD		
Partner ideal standards						
Warmth/trustworthiness	6.22	0.57	5.97	0.62	.77	.76
Attractiveness/vitality	4.77	0.94	5.12	0.74	.77	.66
Status/resources	4.97	1.24	4.23	1.28	.92	.88
Partner perceptions						
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.70	0.81	5.75	0.78	.83	.84
Attractiveness/vitality	5.61	0.79	5.42	0.86	.67	.75
Status/resources	5.36	0.87	5.58	0.98	.78	.81
Partner ideal–perception consistency						
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.79	0.96	5.84	0.78	.87	.81
Attractiveness/vitality	5.81	0.86	5.41	0.83	.73	.76
Status/resources	5.77	1.03	5.88	0.78	.85	.80
Partner regulation						
Warmth/trustworthiness	2.49	1.18	2.33	1.19	.78	.83
Attractiveness/vitality	2.03	1.14	2.58	1.17	.80	.78
Status/resources	2.56	1.38	2.15	1.23	.75	.85
Partner regulation success[a]						
Warmth/trustworthiness (N = 46)	2.86	1.27	2.66	1.20	.76	.82
Attractiveness/vitality (N = 44)	2.14	1.12	2.75	1.11	.74	.77
Status/resources (N = 40)	2.56	1.18	2.69	1.17	.64	.72
Self-perceptions						
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.60	0.80	5.31	0.71	.83	.72
Attractiveness/vitality	4.38	0.99	4.77	0.79	.77	.69
Status/resources	5.36	0.93	5.15	0.89	.82	.78
Self ideal–perception consistency						
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.35	0.94	5.13	0.84	.81	.78
Attractiveness/vitality	4.18	1.12	4.66	0.90	.80	.75
Status/resources	4.89	1.35	4.78	0.96	.90	.80
Inferred ideal–perception consistency						
Warmth/trustworthiness	5.29	1.04	5.01	0.93	.84	.84
Attractiveness/vitality	4.92	1.05	5.11	0.75	.77	.68
Status/resources	5.34	1.08	4.90	1.08	.85	.84
Self-regulation						
Warmth/trustworthiness	3.08	1.35	3.42	1.20	.81	.80
Attractiveness/vitality	3.32	1.09	3.18	1.10	.70	.75
Status/resources	3.48	1.48	4.00	1.30	.77	.74
Perceptions of partner's regulation						
Warmth/trustworthiness	2.44	1.25	3.00	1.26	.82	.80
Attractiveness/vitality	2.46	1.24	2.42	1.13	.76	.77
Status/resources	2.32	1.35	3.16	1.43	.78	.80
Relationship quality	6.17	0.62	6.02	0.66	.82	.85
Self-esteem	5.33	1.02	5.44	0.90	.90	.88

Note. Internal reliability (IR) was measured with Cronbach's alphas.

[a] Descriptive data regarding regulation success include only those couples who both reported actually attempting to change their partner on specific ideal dimensions. Thus, the sample sizes vary across couples for these analyses.

As in Study 1, we wanted to eliminate the possibility that the associations across ideal–perception consistency and regulation were produced by partner perceptions or the importance attached to each ideal dimension (rather than the inconsistency between perceptions and ideal standards). Accordingly, we ran a series of SEM analyses that included (a) paths between regulation and both actual perceptions and ideal–perception consistency and (b) in a separate set of analyses, paths between regulation and both ideal standards and ideal–perception consistency. Across ideal dimensions, for both men and women, partner ideal–perception consistency was more strongly associated with partner regulation attempts (βs = −.14 to −.55, average β = −.37) than partner perceptions (βs = −.25 to .10, average β = −.12) or ideal standards (βs = .11 to .35, average β = .23). These results

replicate Study 1 and provide further evidence that partner regulation is associated with the discrepancy between perceptions and ideal standards rather than the importance attached to particular partner qualities or perceptions of the partner per se.[13]

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[13] As in Study 1, the predicted pattern of effects emerged most strongly when participants perceived their partner as falling short of ideal standards compared with when partner perceptions matched or exceeded ideal standards. That is, those individuals whose partner ratings matched or exceeded their ratings of ideal importance had higher ideal–perception consistency ratings, $ts(60) = 2.24$ to 5.54, $ps < .05$, and exhibited low levels of regulation regardless of how positively or negatively they viewed their current or ideal partner (also see Footnote 8).
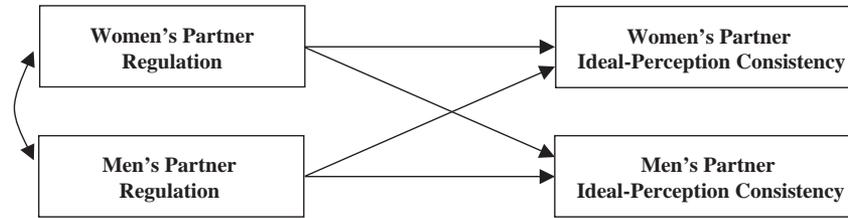
Figure 4. Structural equation model testing the associations between partner regulation and partner ideal–perception consistency, Study 2a.

Does Perceived Regulation Success Moderate the Link Between Regulation and Ideal–Perception Consistency?

To test our hypothesis that perceived regulation success should moderate the link between regulation and ideal–perception consistency (see Figure 1, Model 2), we repeated the hierarchical regression analyses carried out in Study 1 using SEM. We first ran a model with regulation attempts and perceived regulation success predicting ideal–perception consistency. Models were run separately for each ideal dimension and only included couples in which both members reported regulation attempts for the specific dimension (samples ranged from 40 to 46 couples; see Table 4). We again pooled the paths across gender, and there were no significant gender differences in the paths, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, Ns = 40–46) = 0.07$ to $2.34, ps > .05$. The SEM coefficients for these analyses are presented on the right side of Table 3. As predicted, main effects revealed that the more individuals tried to change their partner, the lower their perceptions of consistency. Furthermore, the more successful warmth/trustworthiness and attractiveness/vitality regulation attempts were perceived, the higher the ratings of ideal–perception consistency.

We then entered the interaction term to each model—again pooling across gender with no differences in the paths, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, Ns = 40–46) = 0.12$ to $0.82, ps > .05$, except for one path noted below. The interactions between partner regulation and perceived regulation success were significant on the warmth/trustworthiness and—for women only, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 44) = 6.72, p < .05$—attractiveness/vitality dimensions. The patterns of the interactions were the same across ideal dimensions and identical to those found in Study 1 (see Figure 2). Specifically, greater attempts to change partner attributes were associated with lower ideal–perception consistency. However, ideal–perception consistency was reduced further for participants whose regulation efforts were viewed as unsuccessful, particularly if the individual had tried very hard to bring about change.

Does Ideal–Perception Consistency Mediate the Link Between Partner Regulation and Relationship Quality?

To test for mediation (see Model 3), we again used SEM to test the model for both relationship partners simultaneously (see Figure 5). Two cross-partner paths were entered into the equation; women's ideal–perception consistency to men's relationship quality, and men's ideal–perception consistency to women's relationship quality. (No other cross-partner paths were significant, and therefore no other paths were included in the model.) We also pooled all paths across gender (including the direct path from regulation to relationship quality), with no significant differences in the paths, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.01$ to $1.22, ps \geq .05$. The one exception was the cross-partner paths between women's status/resources partner

ideal–perception consistency and men's relationship quality, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 5.17, p < .05$. Thus, the associated paths were left unconstrained in the status/resources model.

The results for the mediation model are depicted in Figure 5. The model produced an excellent fit across all three ideal dimensions, $\chi^2(9, N = 62) = 4.32$ to $9.39, ps > .05$, CFIs $= .99$ to 1.00, RMSEAs $= .00$ to $.03$. For both men and women, more effortful attempts to regulate the partner in the past 6 months predicted lower levels of partner ideal–perception consistency, which in turn predicted more negative perceptions of relationship quality. Moreover, the indirect effect for all three models was significant; $zs = -2.55$ to $-4.62, ps < .05$. These latter results indicate that the direct paths were significantly reduced when the mediating variable was controlled.

In addition, consistent with prior research (Campbell et al., 2001), higher levels of women's ideal–perception consistency were positively related to men's relationship quality and vice versa (with the exception of women's status/resources ideal–perception consistency). Individuals' perceptions of their relationship quality, in other words, were not solely a product of their own perceptions of partner ideal consistency but were also a product of the partner ideal consistency judgments of their partners.

To rule out potential artifacts, we recalculated the models sequentially controlling for self-esteem, relationship length, and relationship status. None of the direct or indirect paths changed in their levels of significance, and the size of the paths altered very little. As in Study 1, to examine whether ideal–perception consistency predicts relationship quality beyond partner perceptions or ideal standards, we recalculated the mediation models partialing out these two variables. As with the links between ideal–perception consistency and regulation, the direct within-individual paths between ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality remained positive and significant ($\beta s = .16$ to $.52, ps < .05$). These results provide further support that a key variable associated with partner regulation and, in turn, relationship quality is the consistency between perceptions and ideal standards.[14]

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[14] As in Study 1, we repeated the mediation analyses incorporating regulation success and the Regulation × Regulation Success interaction term as predictor variables to examine whether regulation success influenced relationship quality via perceptions of ideal consistency. Low sample sizes (40–46) combined with the number of variables included in these models meant that, where regulation success and the interaction term predicted ideal–perception consistency (see Table 3), three of four failed to significantly predict relationship quality, although these paths were in the predicted direction. Nevertheless, the indirect effect was significant in all cases ($zs = 2.06$ to $2.77, ps < .05$).
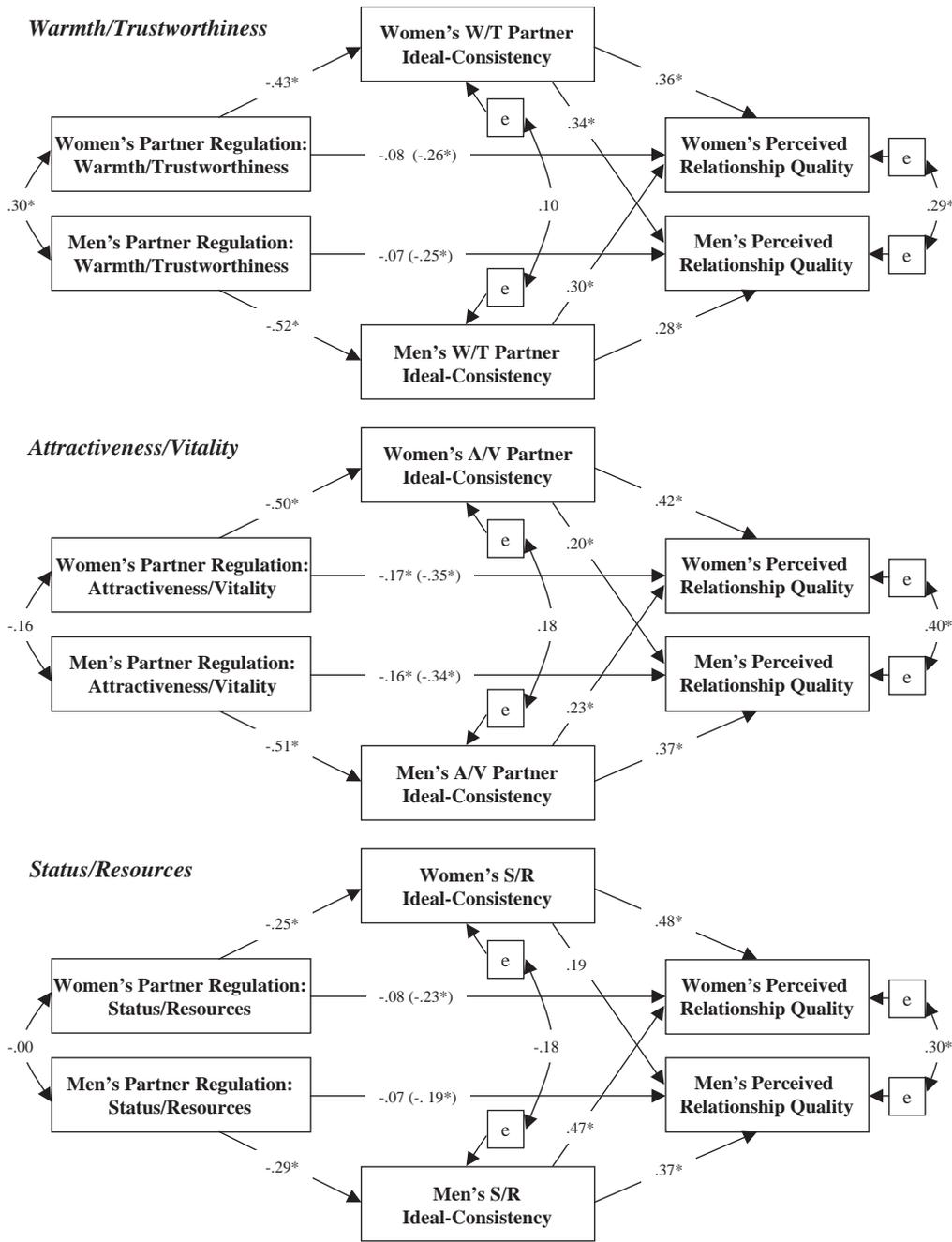
Figure 5. Structural equation models (SEM) showing ideal–perception consistency mediating the path between partner regulation and perceived relationship quality, Study 2a. Values are standardized SEM coefficients. Coefficients when partner ideal–perception consistency is not controlled are shown in parentheses. W/T = warmth/trustworthiness, A/V = attractiveness/vitality, and S/R = status/resources. e represents the error term for each variable. *$p < .05$.

Testing Partner Effects: Links Between Partner's Regulation Attempts, Self-Perceptions, Inferred Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Self-Regulation

We had three main predictions regarding the links between partner's regulation attempts and judgments held by the targeted partner. Specifically, we expected that receiving strong regulation attempts from one's partner would be associated with (a) lower self-perceptions regarding targeted qualities, (b) lower inferred ideal–perception consistency (perceptions of the degree to which self matches partner's ideal standards) on the targeted dimension, and (c) stronger efforts to change targeted self-attributes.

Using SEM, we first examined the associations between regulation attempts made by the partner (e.g., women's regulation attempts of their male partners) and individuals' self-perceptions (e.g., men's self-perceptions). Our analysis strategy is equivalent to that shown in Figure 4 (with partner ideal–consistency variables replaced by self-perception ratings). If partners' regulation attempts were related to self-perceptions as we predicted, the cross-paths (e.g., path running from women's partner regulation to men's self-perceptions) should be negative and significant.

To control for overall self-evaluation, we partialed out self-perceptions on the other two ideal dimensions in all analyses. Thus, any effects found are domain specific (e.g., women's warmth/trustworthiness partner regulation influences men's perceptions of these particular qualities and not attractiveness/vitality or status/resources self-attributes). In addition, we pooled the paths across gender. For the warmth/trustworthiness and attractiveness/vitality dimensions, there were no differences in the paths across gender, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.06$ to 0.64, $ps > .05$ (see Footnote 12). However, the cross-paths in the status/resources model were significantly different, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 4.60$, $p < .05$, and were therefore left unconstrained.

The cross-path coefficients for all three ideal dimensions are presented in the first column of Table 5 (see top half of Table). As predicted, for both women and men, the more individuals attempted to change the warmth/trustworthiness of their partner, the more negative were their partners' self-perceptions on this dimension. However, the cross-partner paths for attractiveness/vitality and status/resources were not significant.

Next, we examined the association between partner's regulation attempts and inferred ideal–perception consistency (i.e., the extent to which the individual perceives the self as matching the ideal standards held by the partner). Again, these analyses controlled for inferred ideal consistency across ideal dimensions to rule out the effects of global evaluation. In addition, because judgments regarding how the self is perceived by the partner could be influenced by self-perceptions (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001), we also controlled for self-perceptions on the corresponding ideal dimension. As before, the cross-paths were pooled across gender, and LM tests revealed no gender differences for any of the cross–paths, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.01$ to 1.57, $ps > .05$. As shown in Table 5, for both women and men, greater regulation received from the partner on the attractiveness/vitality dimension was associated with reduced levels of inferred ideal–perception consistency.

Finally, using the same analysis strategy, we tested whether participants responded to their partner's regulation efforts by attempting to change the self. Although participants reported on their self-regulation and partner regulation attempts over the same time period, a positive association between the partner's regulation attempts and attempts to change self may suggest that individuals increase their self-regulatory efforts when they receive regulation attempts from their partner. As before, to illustrate that the effects of partner's regulation attempts were domain specific, we controlled self-regulation on the other two ideal dimensions. The cross-partner paths were significantly different across sex for the attractiveness/vitality and status/resources dimensions, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 3.93$, $p < .05$, so we left the cross-paths unconstrained for these sets of analyses.

As predicted, stronger regulation attempts from the partner were associated with increased self-directed regulation across ideal dimensions. That is, the more both women and men received warmth/trustworthiness regulation attempts from their partner, the more they tried to change these aspects of themselves. However, only women responded to their partner's attractiveness/vitality regulation attempts, and only men responded to their partner's regulatory efforts focusing on status/resources self-attributes.

In summary, we found some evidence for partner effects (as predicted). In addition, when controlling for possible confounding

Table 5

Structural Equation Modeling Coefficients for Paths From Partner's Regulation Attempts to Self-Perceptions, Inferred Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Self-Regulation Attempts (Study 2a)

Partner's regulation attempts and perceptions of partner's regulation attempts	Self-perceptions		Inferred ideal–perception consistency		Self-regulation	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Partner's regulation attempts						
Warmth/trustworthiness	−.20*	−.18*	−.02	−.02	.21*	.23*
Vitality/attractiveness	.03	.03	−.21*	−.15*	.29*	*.01*
Status/resources	*.19*	*−.19*	−.10	−.09	*.04*	.24*
Perceptions of partner's regulation attempts						
Warmth/trustworthiness	−.39*	−.46*	−.24*	−.28*	.34*	.37*
Vitality/attractiveness	−.08	−.09	−.16*	−.20*	.35*	.30*
Status/resources	−.14	−.16	−.20*	−.20*	.31*	.37*

Note. Coefficients in the top half of the table represent the association between partners' regulation attempts (e.g., women's partner regulation attempts) and self-perceptions (e.g., men's self-perceptions), inferred ideal–perception consistency (e.g., men's inferences regarding the extent to which they match their female partner's ideal standards), and self-regulation (e.g., men's self-directed regulatory efforts). Coefficients in the bottom half of the table represent the equivalent analyses using perceptions of partner's regulation attempts (e.g., men's perceptions of their female partner's regulation attempts) as the predictor variable. The coefficients for self-perceptions control for self-perceptions across the two other ideal dimensions. The coefficients for inferred ideal–perception consistency control for inferred ideal–consistency across the two other ideal dimensions as well as self-perceptions on the corresponding dimension. The coefficients for self-regulation control for self-regulation attempts across the two other ideal dimensions. All paths are pooled across men and women (see Footnote 12), except those which were significantly different across gender (shown in italics).
* $p < .05$.

variables—such as the extent to which individuals matched their own ideal standards (self-ideal–perception consistency), global levels of self-esteem, and partner perceptions and partner ideal–perception consistency—95% of the effects remained significant across analyses. The exact pattern of findings, however, was inconsistent across ideal dimensions and dependent measures. As noted previously, prior research has demonstrated that perceptions of partners' behavior have important and perhaps more direct effects on relationship judgments beyond those predicted by the behavior reported by the partner (e.g., Bolger et al., 2000; Gable et al., 2003). Thus, we (conceptually) reexamined the above partner effects, but this time we tested the impact of perceptions of partner's regulation on self-judgments and self-regulation at the within-individual level.

Perceptions of Partner's Regulation

The correlations between participants' perceptions of their partner's regulation attempts (i.e., ratings of the degree to which individuals had received regulation from their partners) and their partner's reported regulation attempts were positive across all three ideal dimensions for both men and women (rs = .07 to .33, average r = .20), indicating that participants were tracking, to some extent, their partner's regulation efforts. Nevertheless, the size of these correlations suggests that some discrepancy existed between the perceptions of regulation behavior across partners.

We repeated the above set of analyses testing partner effects, but using perceptions of partner's regulation attempts as the predictor variable. As before, all paths were calculated while controlling for global evaluation (e.g., partialing out self-perceptions on the other two ideal dimensions), and all paths were pooled across gender (with no gender differences evident across analyses) $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.01$ to 2.93, ps > .05.

The SEM coefficients for perceptions of the partner's regulation predicting (a) self-perceptions, (b) inferred ideal–perception consistency, and (c) self-regulation are shown in the bottom half of Table 5. First, as before, for both men and women, perceptions of partner's regulation reduced how positively individuals perceived their own warmth/trustworthiness attributes, but there were null findings for the remaining two dimensions. Second, in contrast, across all three ideal dimensions, perceiving that the partner was attempting to change self was associated with more negative inferences regarding the extent to which self matched the partner's ideal standards. And, third, for both men and women, across ideal dimensions, the more individuals perceived their partner as attempting to change them over the past 6 months, the more they reported trying to change these same characteristics in themselves.

Moreover, all paths remained significant when partialing out individuals' own self-ideal–perception consistency, self-esteem, partner perceptions, and partner ideal–perception consistency both within and across partners. Thus, perceiving that the partner had tried to change self over the past 6 months was associated with (a) more negative (warmth/trustworthiness) self-perceptions, (b) more negative evaluations regarding how closely self matches the ideal standards held by the partner, and (c) an increase in self-regulatory efforts, regardless of individuals' own self- or partner evaluations or the evaluations made by their partner.

Finally, we examined whether perceptions of partner's regulation attempts and inferred ideal–perception consistency ratings

were associated with relationship quality. As expected, perceiving stronger regulation attempts from the partner was associated with lower perceptions of relationship quality across ideal dimensions (βs = −.21 to −.41, ps < .05), as was lower inferred ideal–perception consistency (βs = .18 to .51, ps < .05, with the exception of men's warmth/trustworthiness inferred ideal consistency, β = −.04), and these effects remained significant when controlling for partner regulation attempts. Thus, the partner effects demonstrated above do have negative implications for relationship evaluations (also see cross-partner paths in Figure 5) consistent with previous research (e.g., Murray et al., 2000, 2001).

Discussion

The results of Study 2a replicated the central findings of Study 1. For all three ideal dimensions, and for both men and women, more strenuous attempts to change the partner were associated with lower partner ideal–perception consistency. Moreover, these links were specific to particular ideal dimensions and were not a function of global evaluations, perceptions of the partner, or ideal standards.

The results of Study 2a also provided further support for the models shown in Figure 1. Although the power to find interaction effects was fairly low in this study because of relatively small sample sizes, we still found evidence that less successful regulation attempts reduced the consistency between ideal standards and partner perceptions (and vice versa; see Model 2). Moreover, the mediation model (Model 3) received solid support across all three ideal dimensions, with attempts to change the partner during the previous 6 months predicting lower partner ideal–perception consistency, which in turn predicted lower perceived relationship quality.

One novel objective of Study 2a was to determine how regulation, ideal–perception consistency, and relationship satisfaction were related between relationship partners. As predicted, we found that relationship quality was not only a function of how people viewed their partners but also influenced by how their partners viewed them. Moreover, regulation received from the partner (both as reported by the partner and as perceived by the target) had important consequences for self-perceptions and behavior.

First, stronger regulation received from the partner was related to more negative self-perceptions, but only for warmth/trustworthiness attributes. Given the importance of warmth/trustworthiness characteristics in close relationships, and the deeply interpersonal quality of these attributes, it is perhaps not surprising that partner regulation exerted a direct effect on targets' self-perceptions of these specific qualities. Attractiveness/vitality and status/resources attributes, on the other hand, tend to be more objective. Accordingly, self-perceptions on these dimensions may be less vulnerable to partners' expectations and regulation attempts.

Second, although partner's regulation did not influence self-perceptions on the other two dimensions, the associations across partner's regulation and inferred ideal–perception consistency suggested that individuals did not ignore the regulation attempts of their partners. Specifically, we found evidence that stronger regulation received from the partner was related to more negative perceptions of how closely individuals believed they matched their partner's standards. Third, the associations between partner's regulation and individuals' self-regulation across dimensions suggested that

participants often responded to their partner's regulation attempts by increasing self-regulatory efforts to change the targeted characteristics. Taken together, these data provide good preliminary evidence that partner regulation generally has detrimental impacts on relationship well-being because such attempts produce more negative perceptions and relationship evaluations for both partners.

A major limitation of both Study 1 and Study 2a is that they used cross-sectional designs. For example, although the results in the prior studies supported the hypothesized links between regulation, ideal–perception consistency, and relationship quality, we were unable to test the possibility of the reverse mediation chain (i.e., regulation mediating the association between ideal consistency and relationship quality). A longitudinal component of Study 2 (Study 2b) was designed to remedy these limitations by investigating how ideal–perception consistency and regulation attempts influence each other and judgments of relationship quality over time (see Figure 1, Model 4).

Study 2b

Couples who had participated in Study 2a reported on their (a) partner regulation, (b) partner ideal–perception consistency, and (c) perceived relationship quality in a 6-month follow-up telephone interview. Assessing both ideal–perception consistency and regulation attempts on two separate occasions permitted a cross-lagged design, which allowed us to test the extent to which ideal consistency and regulation might influence each other across time. In Study 1 and Study 2a, we provided evidence that regulation attempts during the past 6 months appear to influence current perceptions of ideal consistency (see Figure 1, Model 1). We expected to replicate the same finding examining these variables over time (see Figure 1, Model 4, Path a). Another crucial component of the Ideal Standards Model, however, is the proposition that ideal–perception consistency should motivate regulation attempts (see Figure 1, Model 4, Path b). Accordingly, we had two main predictions. First, lower partner ideal–perception consistency at Time 1 should predict greater partner regulation attempts at Time 2. Second, greater regulation attempts at Time 1 should predict lower partner ideal–perception consistency at Time 2.

Finally, we also examined how both ideal–perception consistency and regulation influenced changes in relationship quality over time. We expected that reductions in ideal–perception consistency would predict more negative perceived relationship quality at Time 2 (controlling for relationship quality assessed at Time 1). However, consistent with the mediation model supported in the previous studies (see Figure 1, Model 3), we did not expect direct links between changes in regulation and relationship quality (when controlling for ideal–perception consistency). This finding would support our contention that the primary direct outcome of regulation attempts is modifying the consistency between perceptions and ideal standards, which in turn influences judgments of relationship quality.

Method

Participants

Of the 62 couples who participated in Study 2a, 51 reported on their partner ideal–perception consistency and partner regulation 6 months after

their initial testing session. Of those who did not participate, 9 couples had broken up and 2 chose not to participate.

Telephone Follow-Up at 6 Months

To have a more efficient and practical questionnaire for the telephone interview, all participants completed a short version of the partner ideal–perception consistency scale and the partner regulation questionnaire. Two items from each of the mate ideal dimensions were included for each measure. The items were "understanding" and "supportive" for the warmth/trustworthiness dimension, "attractive appearance" and "good lover" for the attractiveness/vitality dimension, and "successful" and "financially secure" for the status/resources dimension. Participants rated each item on 7-point scales. For the partner ideal–perception consistency scales, participants rated each attribute in terms of the extent to which their partner matched their ideal (1 = *does not match my ideal at all*, 7 = *completely matches my ideal*). For the partner regulation questionnaires, participants rated the extent to which they had tried in some way to change that aspect of their partner during the past 6 months (1 = *not tried at all to change*, 7 = *tried hard to change*).

We then computed equivalent (two item) measures for each construct for both Time 1 and Time 2. Table 6 presents descriptive statistics and reliability indexes. The means for each scale were similar to those reported in the previous studies, which used the full set of items (see Tables 1 and 4). For each measure assessed at both time periods, the two items tapping each dimension correlated positively and at adequate levels (average r = .55 at Time 1 and .52 at Time 2). Hence, the items from each dimension were summed and averaged to provide single indexes for each dimension. The final column of Table 6 shows the within-subject longitudinal correlations. For both men and women across all three ideal dimensions, there generally was good consistency for each measure across time (average rs = .55 for ideal–perception consistency and .49 for regulation). Thus, the short versions of our scales were reasonably reliable.

Participants also completed the seven-item version of the PRQC Inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000b) to assess perceived relationship quality (see Study 1). The means for each scale were similar to those reported previously (M = 6.13, SD = 0.78, and M = 6.04, SD = 0.70, for women and men, respectively), and the scale had good internal reliability (Cronbach's αs = .90 and .88, respectively).

Procedure

Both members of each couple were phoned 6 months after their initial testing session, and each partner verbally responded to the follow-up questionnaires described above (as well as several additional questions not germane to the current study). Participants completed the scales in the same order they did in the laboratory. All participants initially completed the relationship quality measure, followed by the ideal consistency and regulation questionnaires (with half of the couples responding to the ideal consistency scales first and half responding to the regulation scales first). At the completion of the interview, couples were entered into a cash draw for $75.

Results

Cross-Lagged Analyses

To analyze the cross-lagged relations, we again used an SEM approach. The design strategy is illustrated in Figure 6. First, we examined the cross-time associations between partner ideal–perception consistency and partner regulation. We set the longitudinal within-subject paths (e.g., paths running from Time 1 ideal consistency to Time 2 ideal consistency) to be equal within gender. This was done to ensure that any differences in the cross-lagged paths were not a function of differential reliabilities across mea-

Table 6

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Partner Ideal–Perception Consistency and Partner Regulation (Short) Scales at Times 1 and 2 (Study 2b)

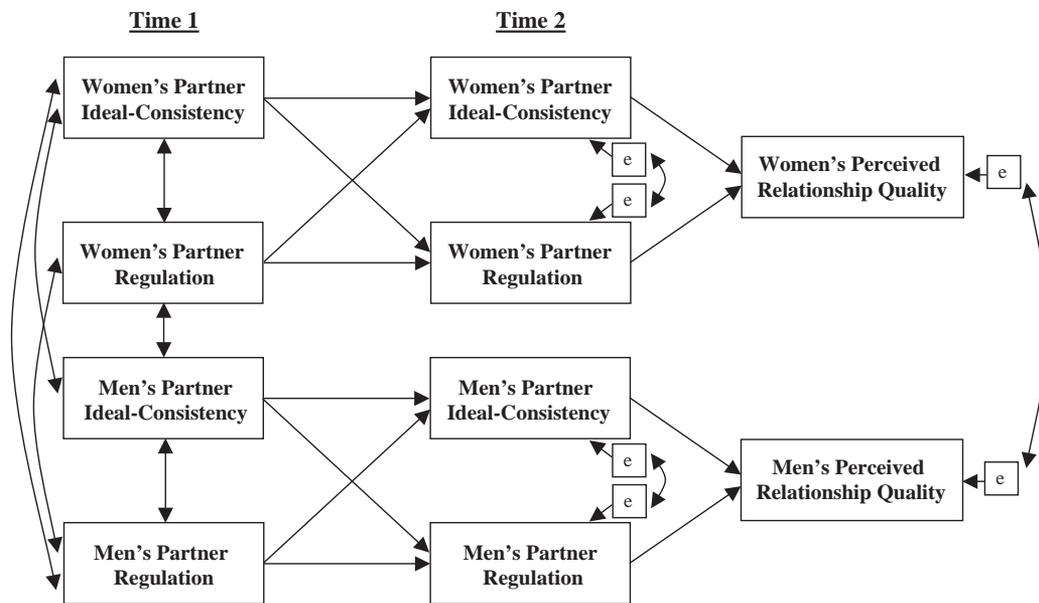| Partner ideal–perception consistency and partner regulation	Time 1 Women M	Time 1 Women SD	Time 1 Men M	Time 1 Men SD	Women r	Men r	Time 2 Women M	Time 2 Women SD	Time 2 Men M	Time 2 Men SD	Women r	Men r	Across Times 1 and 2 Women r	Across Times 1 and 2 Men r
Partner ideal–perception consistency														
Warmth/trustworthiness	6.09	1.07	6.14	0.83	.64	.62	5.83	0.80	5.86	0.86	.40	.58	.66	.51
Attractiveness/vitality	6.14	0.81	5.53	1.14	.46	.59	6.06	0.79	5.94	0.89	.38	.78	.58	.46
Status/resources	5.79	1.14	5.89	0.95	.71	.55	4.90	1.01	6.07	0.92	.57	.65	.57	.50
Partner regulation														
Warmth/trustworthiness	2.38	1.31	2.33	1.38	.45	.54	2.70	1.60	2.69	1.41	.57	.66	.20[a]	.68
Attractiveness/vitality	2.25	1.53	2.67	1.49	.44	.51	1.93	1.26	2.30	1.16	.37	.37	.64	.33
Status/resources	2.78	1.71	2.45	1.56	.49	.64	2.22	1.44	2.42	1.33	.52	.34	.49	.58

Note. Both Time 1 and Time 2 measures comprise the equivalent two-item scales described in the *Method* section. Correlations at Times 1 and 2 are the correlations between the two ratings for each dimension. Correlations across Times 1 and 2 are the within-subject longitudinal correlations (i.e., measure at Time 1 correlated with the equivalent measure at Time 2).
[a] $p > .05$. All other correlations are significant at $p < .05$.

sures (which can be a problem with cross-lagged analyses). LM tests indicated that, for all analyses, there were no differences in the within-subject longitudinal paths, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.02$ to 2.57, $ps > .05$. To test for gender differences, we pooled the diagonal paths across women and men (i.e., each cross-lagged path for women was set equal to the equivalent path for men). None of the cross-lagged paths were significantly different across gender, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.02$ to 1.54, $ps > .05$. Thus, these paths were left pooled (see Footnote 12).

Over time, we predicted that stronger attempts to regulate the partner would reduce the consistency between perceptions and ideal standards and that lower ideal–perception consistency would motivate stronger regulation attempts (see Figure 1, Model 4, Paths a and b). As shown in Table 7, solid evidence was found for both predictions. Strikingly, all of the cross-lagged paths were negative, and 8 of the 12 paths were significant. To test whether the cross-lagged results were simply a function of general levels of positivity, we recalculated all the cross-lagged analyses, controlling for relationship length, self-esteem, and judgments of relationship quality assessed at Time 1. The results were unchanged, with all significant cross-lagged paths remaining significant. Finally, as we had done previously, we controlled for partner perceptions and ideal standards assessed at Time 1, and, as before, the size of the significant paths in Table 7 were typically not reduced ($\beta s = -.11$ to $-.38$).

Figure 6. Structural equation model (SEM) testing the associations between partner regulation, partner ideal–perception consistency, and relationship quality over a 6-month period, Study 2b.

Table 7

SEM Coefficients From Cross-Lagged Analyses Testing the Associations Between Partner Regulation and Ideal–Perception Consistency Across Time (Study 2b)

Partner ideal–perception consistency	Partner regulation as predictor variable		Partner regulation as dependent variable	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Warmth/trustworthiness	−.21*	−.19*	−.13	−.13
Attractiveness/vitality	−.17	−.14	−.23*	−.35*
Status/resources	−.19*	−.20*	−.21*	−.20*

Note. All paths are pooled across gender (see Footnote 12).
* $p < .05$.

Partner Regulation, Ideal–Perception Consistency, and Relationship Quality

The paths in Figure 6 running from Time 2 ideal–perception consistency and regulation attempts to relationship quality (assessed at Time 2) also allowed us to examine whether regulation attempts and partner ideal–perception consistency influenced later judgments of relationship quality. These paths were calculated while controlling for relationship quality measured at Time 1, and the resulting coefficients are displayed in Table 8. Across dimensions, strong positive associations were found between ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality. In contrast, partner regulation attempts were not associated with perceptions of relationship quality, with one exception: Attractiveness/vitality partner regulation was positively, although less strongly, associated with changes in relationship quality. In addition, the significant paths between ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality remained strong and significant when controlling for partner perception ratings (βs = .30 to .63) and partner ideal standards (βs = .32 to .60) gathered at Time 1. Thus, reductions in ideal consistency across time are associated with decreasing levels of perceived relationship quality.[15]

These findings confirm our contention that the pivotal proximal determinant of relationship evaluation is the consistency across actual perceptions and ideal standards (as opposed to regulation attempts), and they are consistent with the previously reported mediation models suggesting that regulation feeds back into ideal–perception consistency, which in turn influences judgments of relationship quality.

Discussion

These results provide evidence for the bidirectional nature of the connections between ideal–perception consistency and regulation (see Model 4). As expected, we found that (a) greater attempts to change the partner predicted reduced judgments of partner ideal–perception consistency across time and (b) lower perceived consistency between partner perceptions and ideal standards motivated more strenuous regulation attempts over time. Moreover, when controlling for the current and longitudinal associations across ideal–perception consistency and regulation, reductions in ideal consistency predicted more negative relationship evaluations across time.

Studies 1 and 2a used cross-sectional samples to test models of how regulation attempts during the previous 6 months are related to current perceptions of ideal consistency and, in turn, relationship evaluation. This extension replicated these findings using a longitudinal design and supported the notion that the impact of partner regulation on relationship quality is mediated via the effects that regulation has on ideal–perception consistency. Moreover, the cross-lagged results support a key prediction of the Ideal Standards Model that partner regulation should be motivated by low ideal–perception consistency.

General Discussion

Extending the Ideal Standards Model (Simpson et al., 2001), the current research tested several novel predictions regarding regulation processes in intimate relationships. As predicted, more strenuous partner regulation attempts were associated with lower consistency between partner perceptions and ideal standards (above and beyond either ideal standards or partner perceptions operating on their own). In addition, across all samples, these links occurred within specific mate-evaluation dimensions (warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources) and were not driven by global evaluation biases.

General support was also found for four causal models regarding the consequences partner regulation attempts have for partner and relationship evaluations (see Figure 1). First, we proposed and found good evidence that greater attempts to change the partner reduced how closely the partner was perceived to match ideal standards (see Model 1 and Path a, Model 4). That regulation attempts generally produce more negative perceptions of ideal consistency may seem counterintuitive, particularly given that the aim of regulation attempts is presumably the exact opposite. However, attempts to change the partner will be powerful signals that he or she is failing to meet expectations. Moreover, regulation attempts may increase ideal–perception consistency, but only if such efforts are successful in bringing about change, whereas unsuccessful regulation attempts seem more likely to increase the salience and the psychological significance of the discrepancy.

The low levels of perceived regulation success reported within these studies showed that participants were generally only able to produce small perceived partner improvements (mean levels ranged from 2.14 to 2.86 where 1 represents lack of success and 7 equals success; see Tables 1 and 4). Nevertheless, in support of Model 2 (see Figure 1), more successful regulation attempts were associated with relatively higher ideal–perception consistency. Those participants who had engaged in more intensive regulation and failed, however, had the lowest perceptions of partner ideal consistency. Thus, high levels of partner regulation were likely to exacerbate low ideal consistency, particularly if regulatory efforts were unsuccessful.

Third, we found strong evidence that the negative links between regulation and ideal–perception consistency filter through to judgments of relationship quality. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal

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[15] We also tested for partner effects by running paths from ideal–perception consistency and regulation at Time 2 to partners' relationship quality. Consistent with the cross-sectional analyses reported in Figure 5, all paths from ideal–perception consistency to partners' relationship quality ratings were positive (βs = .11 to .34), but were generally not significant.

Table 8
SEM Coefficients for Paths From Ideal–Perception Consistency and Partner Regulation to Relationship Quality (Time 2; Study 2b)

Partner ideal–perception consistency and partner regulation	Perceived relationship quality	
	Women	Men
Partner ideal–perception consistency		
Warmth/trustworthiness	.38*	.57*
Attractiveness/vitality	.52*	.61*
Status/resources	*.32*	*.03*
Partner regulation		
Warmth/trustworthiness	.05	.05
Attractiveness/vitality	.20*	.21*
Status/resources	.10	.10

Note. Coefficients were calculated controlling for relationship quality assessed at Time 1. All paths were pooled across gender (except for those shown in italics). There were generally no differences in the paths across gender, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 0.01$ to 3.65, $ps > .05$ (see Footnote 12), with the exceptions marked in italics; only women's status/resources partner ideal–perception consistency was significantly associated with relationship quality, $\chi^2_{LM}(1, N = 62) = 5.05$, $p < .05$. These paths were left unconstrained.
* $p < .05$.

analyses demonstrated that more strenuous partner regulation attempts reduced perceptions of ideal consistency, which, in turn, fed into more negative relationship evaluations (see Figure 1, Model 3 and Model 4). These effects are consistent with the hypothesized feedback-loop characteristic of regulation processes; namely, attempts to change the partner impact on relationship quality to the extent that regulation influences the consistency between perceptions and ideal standards.

Finally, consistent with prior accounts of self-regulation that propose regulation attempts should be produced by discrepancies between perceptions and ideals, longitudinal analyses illustrated that lower consistency between partner perceptions and ideal standards motivated an increase in partner regulation attempts (see Path b, Model 4).

To summarize, we found that lower ideal consistency motivated attempts to improve the partner. However, in ironic contrast to the purpose of improvement attempts, partner regulation appears to be generally detrimental for the individual's partner and relationship evaluations. Furthermore, we also identified a second route by which partner regulation attempts are likely to have deleterious consequences for the relationship. We discuss these partner effects next.

The Dyadic Nature of Relationship Regulation

This research breaks new ground by examining how regulation and ideal consistency are related between partners within romantic relationships. Consistent with previous research (Campbell et al., 2001), for all three ideal dimensions we found that perceptions of relationship quality were associated not only with individuals' own judgments of partner ideal consistency but also with how closely individuals matched the ideal standards of their *partners*. This important partner effect suggests that participants were sensitive to how they were evaluated by their romantic partners.

Moreover, extending prior research, Study 2a suggested that one central way in which individuals form judgments of how they are regarded by their partners is the degree to which they are targets of their partners' regulatory efforts. With regard to warmth/trustworthiness characteristics, for example, the more individuals received regulation attempts from their partner during the previous 6 months, the less glowingly they evaluated themselves on this dimension. It is not surprising that regulation of this category of characteristics was negatively associated with individuals' self-perceptions. Warmth/trustworthiness is consistently rated as more important than the other dimensions in long-term relationships by both men and women (see Buss, 1999, and Fletcher, 2002, for reviews), and these interpersonal characteristics are routinely expressed and entwined within day-to-day interactions between partners. Thus, people are likely to be particularly sensitive to both self and partner's possession of warmth/trustworthiness qualities and the extent to which they pass muster on these attributes in the eyes of their partners.

However, individuals did not disregard their partner's regulation behavior on the other two dimensions. Instead, we found evidence that participants adjusted perceptions of their partner's evaluations according to the amount of regulation received—the more regulation the less they believed they matched their partner's standards. These findings suggest that partner regulation or improvement attempts convey crucial information regarding how individuals feel about their partners. Thus, regulation processes do not merely occur within individuals' heads, but are tied to the objective reality of the relationship. This point is also illustrated by the relatively accurate judgments that men and women produced when evaluating their partners' ideal standards. Correlations between inferred ideal–perception consistency (i.e., ratings of the degree to which individuals believed they matched the ideal standards of their partner) and partners' actual partner ideal-consistency ratings across all three ideal dimensions were all positive and typically significant ($rs = .15$ to $.51$, average $r = .30$).

Prior research has shown that perceiving the partner as holding relatively negative judgments about self (such as low ideal–perception consistency) is strongly associated with more negative partner perceptions and lower relationship satisfaction (e.g., Murray et al., 2000, 2001). Thus, partner improvement attempts translate into negative relationship outcomes partly because receiving regulation attempts from one's partner communicates lack of acceptance and negative views of the self held by the partner. Such judgments exert powerful corrosive effects on perceptions of relationship quality.

Other dyadic effects were consistent with prior suggestions that self-regulation may be motivated by perceived discrepancies between self-perceptions and either the goals and wishes of significant others (Moretti & Higgins, 1999) or individuals' perceived relational value (Leary, 2004). When individuals received regulation attempts from their partner they were more likely to engage in regulatory efforts to improve their partner's evaluation. These findings suggest that partner regulation attempts do lead, at least in part, to their intended effect by eliciting attempts from partner to change targeted self-attributes. However, we found some intriguing sex differences. Men's self-regulatory efforts were associated with their partners' reported regulation attempts for status/resources but not for attractiveness/vitality, whereas for women the pattern was the reverse (see Table 5). Previous research has shown

that men typically attach higher importance to attractiveness/vitality partner attributes, and women attach greater value to status/resource partner characteristics (Fletcher et al., 2004; a finding replicated in this research; see Tables 1 and 4). Thus, our results again suggest that individuals' motivation to self-regulate is sensitive to the importance placed on these dimensions by their partners.

Because both self- and partner regulation were reported for the same time period, we were unable to establish whether the receipt of regulation from partner motivates self-regulation efforts or attempts to change self simply involves recruiting the partner to help (or both). Future research could profitably examine these connections over time to throw light on the causal links between partners' regulation attempts, self- and relationship perceptions, and self-regulatory behavior.

Finally, the impact of partners' regulation attempts was examined using both partner-reported regulation attempts and targets' perceptions of that regulation behavior. There was reasonable consistency in the findings across both of these measures; however, perceptions of partner's regulation attained the strongest links with inferred ideal–perception consistency and reports of self-regulation attempts. This finding is consistent with one of the most well-researched and robust findings within the intimate relationship domain; that is, beyond the actual behavior exhibited, how partners perceive and attribute cause to relationship events and interactions powerfully determines how individuals think, feel, and behave within their relationships (see Fincham, 2001).

Implications and Novel Contributions

This research extends prior regulation theories and research in several critical ways. First, consistent with what is already known about the motivating influence of goals, these findings support our hypothesis that important goals or standards are prime determinants of motivating and regulating other individuals in interpersonal settings. Thus, the basic processes traditionally identified as underlying self-regulation also appear to explain the regulation of intimate relationship partners. This extension is important given that intimate relationships have a substantial impact on personal well-being and should be a central domain in which regulation processes are played out.

Second, the specific content of the standards that drive regulation has been relatively neglected within the regulation literature. An important contribution of the Ideal Standards Model is the identification of three major dimensions that individuals use to evaluate and regulate their intimate partner: warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources. Past research has focused on how these dimensions influence partner and relationship evaluation. The current studies show how these ideal dimensions are also implicated in regulation processes. Moreover, to recap, one important result is the indication that regulation processes work through each of the three ideal constructs rather than being driven by global partner or relationship judgments.

Third, many regulation theories (explicitly or implicitly) conceptualize regulation processes in terms of circular feedback loops, in which current states (i.e., perceptions) are compared with a reference value of some kind (i.e., ideal standards or goals), the effects of resulting regulation are monitored, and these judgments, in turn, influence levels of ideal–perception consistency (e.g.,

Carver & Scheier, 1998). Inherent in these accounts is the fundamental role that regulation success should have in moderating the feedback loop. The present research clearly demonstrated the bidirectional associations across ideal consistency and regulation in intimate relationships, and it (at least in part) confirmed the moderating effect of perceived regulation success.

Fourth, we were able to rule out the possibility that evaluative perceptions of the partner (vs. ideal–perception consistency) were driving these regulation processes by statistically controlling for partner perceptions when calculating the associations between regulation attempts and ideal consistency. Indeed, when pitting straight perceptions of the partner directly against ideal–perception consistency ratings, ideal consistency continued to predict regulation, whereas straightforward perceptions typically did not. In addition, although (as expected) ideal importance was positively associated with partner regulation, ideal–perception consistency was a stronger and more robust predictor of regulation in all cases. These results support a fundamental principle of the Ideal Standards Model (and prior regulation theories) that ideal–perception consistency is a key proximal variable in terms of both relationship evaluation and regulation processes.

Finally, as already noted, our results suggest that regulation efforts tend to backfire, and people become even unhappier with their relationship. This raises a question about the functions of the relationship monitoring and regulation system. From a distal evolutionary approach, the functions of an adaptation or behavior are defined in terms of the costs and benefits vis-à-vis reproductive fitness and do not necessarily equate to increased happiness. For example, one reason why humans may have evolved the relationship monitoring and regulation system is to loosen the powerful bonds of love and attachment when standards are not being met, thus enabling individuals to look elsewhere for a new partner and relationship. Alternatively, perhaps a principal function of our ancestral relationship monitoring and regulation system is indeed to improve relationships, but it fails because the contemporary social and cultural environment has changed so that it no longer fits the ancestral environment within which the relevant adaptations developed. For example, maybe contemporary Western cultures, with thousands of accessible partners apparently a mouse-click away, barrages of self-help books and TV shows about relationships and how to make them better, constant images of attractive alternatives, and people apparently having great sex everywhere have ramped up people's expectations and standards to the extent that the relationship monitoring and regulation system has been put into overdrive and, thus, has become relatively dysfunctional in the modern environment. These speculations remain to be tested.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, across studies, the results demonstrated that partner improvement attempts generally have negative implications for partner and relationship evaluations. However, these studies provided little information regarding how individuals actually go about regulating their partners or the differential effects that particular regulation tactics may have on relationship outcomes (e.g., direct confrontational harangues vs. kind and supportive suggestions). The way in which regulation is enacted, and the way in which particular strategies are likely to be perceived, should have pow-

erful moderating effects on the extent to which partner regulation reduces ideal–perception consistency and relationship quality. This might be one reason why individual's perceptions of their partners' regulation are so important in determining the consequences of improvement attempts. We might expect, for example, that more indirect regulation attempts that are not noticed or perceived by the partner or that are not interpreted as attempts to change may be the most innocuous and perhaps effective regulation attempts (also see Bolger et al., 2000). Similarly, regulation attempts that focus on the relationship rather than the individual might also be more effective.

Second, although several studies have examined influence tactics within intimate relationships (e.g., Bui et al., 1994; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard et al., 1986; Oriña et al., 2002), prior studies have not examined (a) whether regulation strategies produce change over time, (b) which strategies are most likely to be successful in bringing about change, or (c) the long-term consequences of successful versus unsuccessful regulation attempts. An examination of these processes should help in determining when partner regulation attempts successfully accomplish the goal of relationship improvement versus jeopardize relationship satisfaction and stability.

Third, the tendency to engage in regulation tactics should depend on the history of regulation successes and failures. Individuals who have been successful in their regulation attempts might be more likely to engage in future efforts to change their partners. People may also develop a general sense of efficacy that either promotes or hinders future partner regulation attempts (Bandura, 1992) and form attributions about the changeability and controllability of specific partner characteristics (e.g., Ruvolo & Rotondo, 1998; see also Fincham, 2001). Similarly, general implicit relationship theories, such as believing that relationships grow and develop through efforts to maintain and improve them, may influence the salience of ideal discrepancies and the likelihood of engaging in regulation tactics (see Knee et al., 2001). Other intrapersonal factors are also likely to moderate how regulation attempts are received. For example, individuals with low self-esteem or who are anxious regarding their partner's love and acceptance may be especially vulnerable to a drop in self-evaluation and relationship satisfaction when subject to their partner's regulation attempts (Murray et al., 2000, 2001).

Finally, when large discrepancies between perceptions and ideal standards on important dimensions simply cannot be diminished, individuals may either resign themselves to enduring the problem behavior or decide to dissolve the relationship. We were unable to examine the connection between regulation processes and relationship dissolution in the current research because only a small percentage of couples ended their relationship across 6 months (only 9 out of 62 couples disbanded; Study 2b). Nevertheless, we suspect that the negative relationship implications of low ideal consistency, paired with high, but unsuccessful, regulation attempts, should increase the probability of relationship dissolution.

Conclusions

These studies investigated relationship regulation attempts directed toward specific characteristics of the partner. However, attempts to improve the relationship should also include attempts to change self-attributes and/or aspects of the relationship that involve both self and partner (e.g., intimacy). Across both studies we did measure the relations between self-ideal–perception consistency (ratings of how closely individuals matched their own ideal standards) and self-regulation. Although we have not reported these results here, consistent with prior theory and research we found that lower consistency between self-perceptions and ideal standards was typically associated with greater attempts to change the self within the three ideal dimensions (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987). However, own judgments of self-ideal–perception consistency and self-regulation were not related to perceptions of relationship quality.

Thus, it is not the experience of general ideal inconsistencies within the relationship that produces negative relationship evaluations, but the extent to which the *partner* is not living up to ideals (and associated partner regulation attempts). These findings are also consistent with previous research illustrating that partner judgments play a more powerful role in predicting relationship satisfaction than self-judgments (e.g., Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005; Sümer & Cozzarelli, 2004).

There remain many unanswered questions about relationship regulation, including the factors that govern when and how regulation occurs, the effectiveness of different regulation strategies and tactics, and their long-term consequences. The current research relied exclusively on self-reports and partner reports, which raises the question of whether similar results might emerge when other methods (including more behavioral ones) are used. This limitation notwithstanding, the current research has several strengths. They include the systematic replication of results across different studies and different measurement strategies, statistically controlling for several potential artifacts, and utilizing both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs.

Understanding when, how, and why individuals try to change their partners or relationships and the consequences of such regulation attempts are important topics for the science of relationships. The current studies provide some initial steps toward answering these questions and affirm the important role that ideal standards play in regulation processes as they unfold in romantic relationships.

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