

Mind-Reading Accuracy in Intimate Relationships: Assessing the Roles of the Relationship, the Target, and the Judge

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Using a video-review procedure, multiple perceivers carried out mind-reading tasks of multiple targets at different levels of acquaintanceship (50 dating couples, friends of the dating partners, and strangers). As predicted, the authors found that mind-reading accuracy was (a) higher as a function of increased acquaintanceship, (b) relatively unaffected by target effects, (c) influenced by individual differences in perceivers' ability, and (d) higher for female than male perceivers. In addition, superior mind-reading accuracy (for dating couples and friends) was related to higher relationship satisfaction, closeness, and more prior disclosure about the problems discussed, but only under moderating conditions related to sex and relationship length. The authors conclude that the nature of the relationship between the perceiver and the target occupies a pivotal role in determining mind-reading accuracy.

Empathic judgments are a ubiquitous feature of social interactions (Asch, 1946). Moreover, *mind reading*—the ability to read others' thoughts and feelings—is perhaps the sine qua non of successful human relationships, providing a bridge between the inner psychological experiences of one person and those of another (Levenson & Ruef, 1992; Smither, 1977).

Yet the study of the features that enhance or diminish mind-reading accuracy (sometimes referred to as *empathic accuracy*) is in its preliminary stages in social psychological research. A feature of prior research is that it has typically used simple dyadic designs, where each judge (perceiver) reads one target. With such designs, it is not possible to address a critical causal question: To what extent does mind-reading accuracy stem from the judge, the target, or the relationship between the judge and the target? An exception has been provided by Ickes, Buysse, et al. (2000), who have recently carried out research in which multiple perceivers have judged multiple targets in mind-reading tasks. These studies have provided initial evidence of individual differences in both mind-reading ability and target readability, although the findings were mixed (see Ickes, Buysse, et al., 2000). However, the role of the relationship between the judge and the target is difficult to assess from these studies, because the level of acquaintanceship was not systematically varied.

The present study built on the work of Ickes and his colleagues (Ickes, Buysse, et al., 2000) by examining some moderators of mind-reading accuracy during an intimate interaction in which the relationship between judges and targets was systematically manipulated. We extended previous research in three principal ways. First, we directly assessed the role of the relationship by comparing the mind-reading performance of dating partners, friends of the dating partners, and strangers (i.e., participants who did not know the dating partners) and explored certain relationship-level factors (such as relationship satisfaction) that might explain why some partners and friends (and their respective relationships) are better than others. Second, we examined the evidence for individual differences in target readability (at different levels of relationship) by assessing the level of consensus achieved by dating partners, friends, and strangers when reading the same target. Finally, we tested for the existence of general mind-reading ability differences by comparing performance across a range of judge–target relationships. For example, is the good judge of strangers also a good judge of his or her friend or his or her dating partner?

Mind Reading: Combining a Realistic and Social Cognitive Approach

A valuable beginning point for any theoretical analysis of mind reading is Funder's (1995) realistic accuracy model (RAM). Although RAM deals with trait judgments, it can also be fruitfully applied to mind reading. In essence, Funder's model states that a trait can be accurately judged if relevant behavioral cues are made available to the perceiver and if the perceiver detects and appropriately utilizes these cues. RAM proposes four basic moderators that influence accuracy by virtue of their effects on each of the four aspects of the judgment process just outlined, namely, what Funder has termed the *good trait*, the *good judge*, the *good target*, and *good information*. The concept of good information in RAM is determined by the nature of the relationship between judge and target.

However, although the utilization stage in RAM implies a role for cognitive processing, a more thoroughgoing social cognitive

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analysis is, in our view, required to understand the way in which the quality of the perceiver–target relationship should influence mind-reading accuracy. Mind reading can be accomplished rapidly and automatically as part of online interaction, or it may be the product of more conscious and in-depth cognition (e.g., “I wonder what she was really thinking?”). In either case, a social cognitive approach posits that the nature of relevant knowledge structures plays a critical role in driving subsequent mind-reading judgments.

Fletcher and his colleagues (Fletcher, 2002) have divided relationship-relevant knowledge structures, or lay relationship theories, into three overlapping components. The most general component is a social module that contains scripts and attributional schemata that apply to relationships and human behavior generally. This overarching component is sometimes termed *theory of mind* and contains rules and schemata associated with the attribution of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, intentions, thoughts, and so forth (Fletcher, 1995; Malle, 1999)—in short, exactly the kinds of attributions made in the course of mind reading. The next level down is specifically focused on intimate relationships and includes categories like beliefs about close relationships in general, ideals, and attachment working models. At the most specific level, local lay (relationship) theories are developed to deal with specific relationships. These local mental models contain an admixture of abstract, theoretical dispositional knowledge (e.g., trait attributions and beliefs) as well as concrete, interaction-specific knowledge (e.g., “my partner becomes upset when I mention her prior divorce”). Such local theories are typically complex and are shot through with affect and relationship evaluations (Baldwin, 1992; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996).

A critical point is that the first two most general relationship-relevant “theories” predate any given relationship and are used by strangers and intimates alike in the process of mind reading. However, a stranger observing a relationship interaction between two individuals has no local theory to fall back on, an acquaintance has perhaps a limited local theory, whereas the participants themselves typically possess rich and extensive local theories about each other and the relationship. Of course, both strangers and intimates alike must rely on behavioral data when reading others’ minds. However, as relationships become closer, rich preexistent theories concerning the partner and the relationship are likely to increasingly direct attention to particular types of behavior, guide the way these data are processed, and influence judgments concerning the target’s mental states (Thomas & Fletcher, 1997; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). The upshot is that the perceiver’s reliance on the face-valid observable data should vary according to the level of relationship, with well-acquainted judges using prior knowledge structures to detect, interpret, and supplement incoming behavioral information to a greater extent than would less acquainted judges. This briefly sketched social cognitive account has profound implications and associated predictions for the roles played by the moderators of mind-reading accuracy. To these we now turn.

The Link Between the Nature of the Relationship and Mind-Reading Accuracy

The commonsense belief that knowing a person should enhance the accuracy of social judgments is contentious. Advocates of the ecological approach to social perception claim that information is typically available in the immediate environment that is sufficient

for quite accurate judgment, without the need for extensive cognitive processing (e.g., McArthur & Baron, 1983). This approach has been bolstered by a line of research that documents the attainment of relatively accurate judgments of emotion, deception, interpersonal expectancies, and personality traits based on thin slices of behavior (see Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). In addition, in the intimate relationship arena, some have argued (with empirical support) that love is blind, with partners driven more by the need to protect or enhance their relationships than by the desire to be accurate and objective in their judgments (Murray, 2001; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). Such research and theorizing have led some to conclude that accuracy plateaus at low levels of acquaintanceship—additional information is merely redundant, or even counterproductive (e.g., Wilson & Schooler, 1991).

However, according to RAM, increased quantity and quality of information should generally lead to greater accuracy (Funder, 1995). Indeed, researchers have accumulated compelling evidence for the positive effect of increased acquaintanceship in cross-sectional studies (e.g., Funder & Colvin, 1988; Stinson & Ickes, 1992), although the picture is not so clear-cut when accuracy is measured longitudinally or when the criterion of accuracy is interjudge consensus (see Kenny, 1994).

The current study had three main aims with respect to the moderating effect of the judge–target relationship on mind-reading accuracy. First, we took account of two important, but commonly neglected, confounding variables: individual differences in the judges’ mind-reading ability and the targets’ readability. Second, we adopted a relatively fine-grained examination of the moderating effect of relationship status by comparing the mind-reading accuracy of dating partners, friends of dating partners, and strangers (with respect to the dating partners). To date, researchers have dealt with the perceiver–target relationship either in a simple dichotomous fashion comparing friends with strangers (e.g., Stinson & Ickes, 1992) or tested for improvement in strangers’ mind reading over the course of a brief interaction (Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995). Third, we tested the effects of the relationship in the context of observations of content-rich and complex dyadic interactions between partners in intimate relationships (i.e., problem-solving interactions)—contexts in which well-acquainted judges should have the opportunity to exploit their extensive preexisting local relationship theories and knowledge.

To achieve these aims, the level of relationship (dating partner vs. friend vs. stranger) was treated as a between-groups variable. The mind-reading criterion consisted of the self-reported thoughts and feelings of dating partners that occurred during the course of their videotaped problem-solving interaction. The mind-reading judgments were recorded by arranging for each type of acquaintance to watch the videotaped interaction and then to infer and write down the partners’ thoughts and feelings. Mind-reading accuracy was finally measured by observer raters comparing the content and valence of the self-reports provided by each partner, with the attributed cognitions or emotions produced by each matched judge. Hence, the male and female dating partners were the relationship interactants, with each dating partner serving as both a perceiver and as a target. In contrast, the nominated friend of the dating partners and the stranger served only as perceivers who observed the dating couple’s interaction (see Figure 1).

In addition, using the same procedures, all groups of participants carried out mind readings of two tapes generated during an earlier study by Thomas et al. (1997) of two married couples (who were

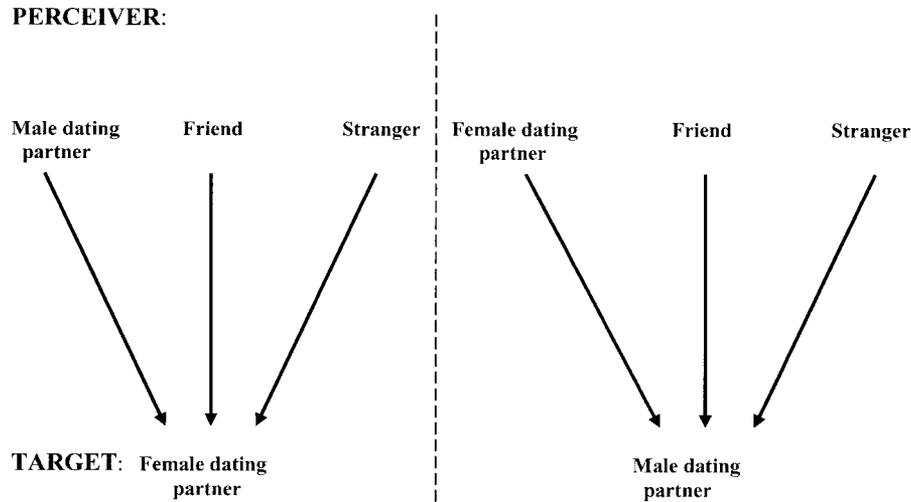


Figure 1. A diagrammatic representation of the perceiver and target relationships in Session 1 of the study.

unknown to the participants) discussing relationship problems (see Figure 2). This allowed us to further disentangle the variance in mind reading associated with the nature of the relationship between the judge and the target. For example, we could use each participant's mind-reading accuracy score on the (unknown) married couples as a proxy for general mind-reading ability and thus control for this factor in assessing the role of the judge–target relationship in mind reading the dating couple.

The dating partners also reported their own online thoughts and feelings at the same time as they recorded their partner attributions, which allowed us to assess and control for the extent to which they assumed their own cognitions and emotions were similar to their partner's at the identical points in the discussion. This is an important methodological refinement, because assumed similarity (or *projection* as it sometimes termed) can provide an explanation for findings concerned with accuracy in relationships (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Schul & Vinokur, 2000). For example, higher levels

of relationship satisfaction could be positively correlated with mind-reading accuracy, because more satisfied people assume (perhaps correctly) that they are more similar to their partners in terms of their mental states (Thomas & Fletcher, 1997).

From a social cognitive perspective, determining the effect of the relationship on mind-reading accuracy involves pitting the more theory-driven judgments of dating partners, and to a lesser extent friends, against the more data-driven judgments of strangers (Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). Certainly, data-driven judgments based primarily on the verbal information made available by targets can lead to impressively accurate social judgments (Gesn & Ickes, 1999). However, the question of who will produce more accurate mind readings—partners, friends, or strangers—essentially involves a competition between the possession of more elaborate and detailed local knowledge and theory and the motivation to render charitable or positive judgments.

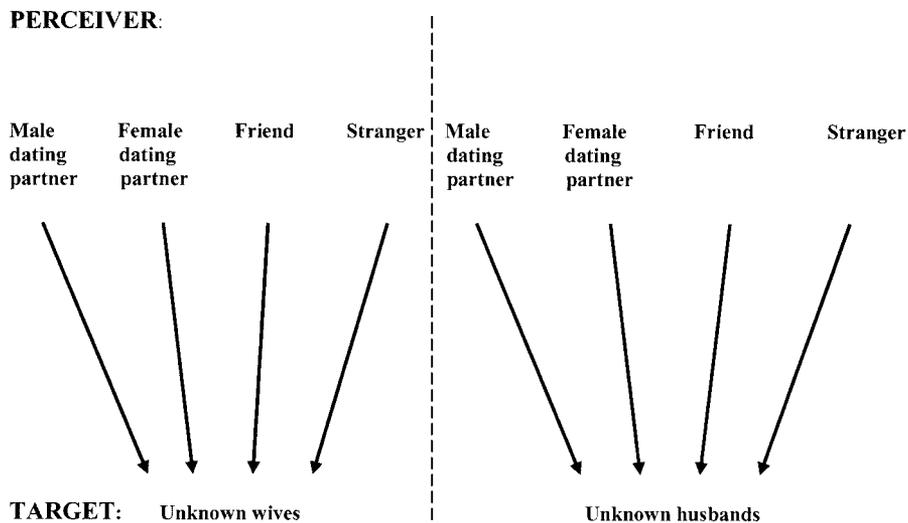


Figure 2. A diagrammatic representation of the perceiver and target relationships in Session 2 of the study.

Given that the dating partners are mind reading during the course of relatively stressful and threatening problem-solving discussions, it could be argued that partners will be driven by the need to protect or enhance their relationship evaluations and thus be motivated to produce positive, but inaccurate, mind-reading judgments (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Murray, 2001). On the other hand, partners (compared with strangers) have access to their local relationship theories, which may include memories of previous problem-solving discussions and perhaps information communicated directly to each other about their thoughts and emotions. Friends of the dating couple do not typically have access to the same level of detailed knowledge as the insiders (partners), but they will presumably be less motivated to produce Pollyannaish mind readings than will the partners. Indeed, some studies have found that friends of people in intimate relationships make more accurate and less biased judgments than do the partners themselves concerning the stability of the relationship (MacDonald & Ross, 1999) and the virtuous qualities of their partners (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000).

Complicating the situation further, Simpson, Fletcher, and Campbell (2001) have argued that people in relationships may adopt one of two distinct motivational stances with associated goals. One motivational stance stresses idealization and relationship-partner enhancement, and the other emphasizes a truth-seeking, realistic mind-set. Recent research has shown that manipulating mind-sets toward the truth-seeking pole (and away from pure relationship enhancement) improves accuracy in predicting relationship dissolution (Gagne & Lydon, 2001) and reduces positivity bias in partner judgments (Wilson, Simpson, Campbell, & Fletcher, 2002). Whether discussing relationship problems (as in the present research) generally motivates couples toward a relationship-enhancement or truth-seeking motivational set may depend on many factors, including how threatening or uncomfortable they find such an activity.

In summary, if the motivation to produce charitable or Pollyannaish judgments overwhelms any advantage from access to an increased knowledge base, then strangers will be the most accurate, followed by friends, with dating partners bringing up the rear. Conversely, if access to local relationship theories and knowledge more than compensates for any motivational bias involved, then this order of accuracy will be reversed, with dating partners being the most accurate, then friends, followed by strangers. On balance, we suspected that access to local knowledge would prove to be too much of an advantage and outweigh love's blinkers.

Individual Differences in Target Readability

The idea that perceivers should consistently find some targets easier to read than others was first suggested by Allport (1937) and has been incorporated into accuracy theories, such as RAM (Funder, 1995). Indeed, compelling evidence for the good target has been found when personality judgments are made by friends (e.g., Colvin, 1993a, 1993b) and when strangers read each other's minds (e.g., Marangoni et al., 1995). However, no research (to our knowledge) has systematically investigated differences in the target's readability at various levels of acquaintanceship.¹

In the present study, dating partners who served as targets were judged by three perceivers: the other dating partner, a friend of the dating couple, and a stranger. Target readability was assessed, in the standard fashion, by the level of consensus in mind-reading

performance attained by the three perceivers when judging the same target. Such a design is a rigorous test of target effects, because judge-based and relationship-based moderators cannot explain the existence of consensus among judges.

On the basis of RAM's logic, for a good target of mind reading to be found across the full range of acquaintanceship, two conditions need to be met (Funder, 1995). First, targets must vary in terms of how diagnostic their behavior is in relation to their private thoughts and feelings. Indeed, there is evidence that partners in relationships do routinely censor and control the expression of their private cognitions and emotions during problem-solving discussions but that the transparency of cognitions and emotions is highly variable across individuals (Fletcher, Thomas, & Durrant, 1999; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). Second, perceivers at each level of the relationship must utilize the available valid behavioral information when reading targets' thoughts and feelings. However, consistent with our discussion above, a social cognitive approach suggests that the way in which such behavioral information is utilized may vary considerably across levels of acquaintanceship. For example, a raised eyebrow may indicate to a woman that her partner is anxious and upset (on the basis of her local theory), but this will not be interpreted in this way (or perhaps even noticed) by a stranger.

To summarize, on the basis of the supposition that local partner and relationship lay theories have a profound impact on the mind-reading task, we expected that individual differences in the target's readability across different levels of the relationship would be weaker than typically reported in prior research. To test whether differential reliance on data versus theory in making judgments might account for this finding, perceivers' mind-reading scores at each level of the relationship were correlated with the diagnosticity of the target's behavior (which was assessed using naive observers). It was predicted that the positive correlation between mind-reading accuracy and the level of diagnostic observational data available would decrease as the level of acquaintanceship increased across targets: The highest correlation would be for strangers, with friends one step down and partners with the lowest correlation.

Individual Differences in Judges' Mind-Reading Ability

Although early research on interpersonal accuracy was dominated by the quest for the good judge of personality (Taft, 1955), almost 50 years later the jury is still out over whether such a thing even exists. Indeed, empirical research has yielded such inconsistent and negative results that some have suggested abandoning the study of individual differences in social judgment ability (e.g., Kenny, 1994). Evidence concerning the existence of individual differences in mind-reading ability are mixed, but two studies have found substantial individual differences in empathic ability when all perceivers have judged a standardized set of three strangers (clients) in the context of a therapist-client interaction (see Ickes, Buysse, et al., 2000).

¹ One exception is Hancock and Ickes's (1996) study, which included a friend as one of the judges. However, because the "getting acquainted" interaction between the targets was presumably quite scripted and superficial, the effect of preexistent friendship-specific knowledge on targets' readability may have been nullified.

The present research extended the few previous studies on individual differences in mind-reading accuracy in three major ways. First, participants made judgments in the context of targets' discussions of their most serious romantic relationship problems. For individual differences in mind-reading to emerge, it is important that the task is treated seriously (i.e., motivation is reasonably high) and that it is relatively difficult (but not impossible). Prior research by Thomas et al. (1997) has suggested that mind-reading in intimate relationship contexts meets these criteria.

Second, because of the variability in the level of acquaintanceship, we were able to assess the consistency of mind-reading performance across different perceiver–target relationships in which (a) targets were all strangers, (b) two targets were friends and the other targets were strangers, and (c) one target was a dating partner and the other targets were strangers. Such a design is a rigorous test of individual differences in mind-reading ability, because the existence of moderate to strong correlations in all cases cannot be explained in terms of target-based or relationship-based moderators. We made the straightforward prediction that individual differences in mind-reading ability would be found regardless of the type of judge–target relationship.

Third, we tested for gender differences in mind-reading ability (that might generalize across different kinds of relationships). Evidence concerning gender differences in mind reading is mixed (see Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). However, a recent review concluded that traditional gender differences in mind-reading accuracy have emerged on judgment tasks in which women are more motivated than men (Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000). One domain where women appear to have greater motivation (and perhaps more knowledge) than men is intimate relationships (Fletcher, 2002). Women spontaneously focus more attention on intimate relationship information, possess more elaborate and complex relational schemas, and talk more about relationships than men (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Bakan, 1966; Cross & Madson, 1997). In short, women appear to be more expert naive relationship theorists than men. Given the nature of the current research task (mind reading during relationship interactions), it was predicted that women would be better mind readers than men across all levels of acquaintance. However, this prediction was tentative, given the mixed nature of prior research findings in this area, with one recent study failing to find evidence of gender differences in mind-reading accuracy with married couples discussing relationship problems (Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003).

Relationship-Level Predictors of Mind-Reading Accuracy for Dating Partners and Friends

We examined three relationship-level predictors of the mind-reading accuracy of dating partners and friends: relationship satisfaction, closeness, and the amount of prior disclosure (concerning the problems) between the dating partners and their friends. At first blush, the prediction that more satisfied (or closer) couples should be more accurate in mind reading seems obvious. However, consistent with the previous discussion, a pivotal determining factor is likely to be the level of threat involved in the relationship. In a classic finding, Simpson et al. (1995) reported that partners who were closer to each other were less accurate when mind reading their partners who had been describing the attractiveness of other available and attractive opposite-sex individuals. Thomas et al. (1997) reported a null relation between relationship satisfac-

tion and mind-reading accuracy, using a sample of married couples, but also found that mind-reading accuracy significantly dipped for longer lived marriages. In contrast, Kilpatrick, Bissonette, and Rusbult (2002) found a moderately strong positive link between relationship satisfaction and mind-reading accuracy but only for couples who were very recently married (compared with the same couples a year or two later). Taken together, these findings suggest that relationship stage or longevity might moderate the link between mind-reading accuracy and relationship satisfaction (or closeness). We tested this hypothesis in the present study without advancing any specific predictions.

We expected that friends who were closer to the dating partners and who had communicated more about the problems under discussion by the dating couple would produce more accurate mind reading. However, given the lack of prior research on this topic, we advanced this hypothesis tentatively. We also examined the role of possible moderators (such as gender) but without any definitive expectations.

Overview

In this study, we tested for the moderating effects of the judge, target, and relationship on mind-reading accuracy during intimate problem-solving interactions. Using a video-review procedure, multiple perceivers judged multiple targets at different levels of acquaintanceship (dating partners vs. friends vs. strangers). To summarize the main hypotheses, we predicted that (a) mind-reading accuracy would improve as a function of greater acquaintanceship, (b) individual differences in target readability across all the levels of acquaintanceship would be relatively weak, (c) individual differences in mind-reading ability would be found across targets, and (d) women would be generally superior to men in mind reading. Finally, we investigated the role of three relationship-level predictors of mind-reading accuracy (for dating couples and friends): relationship satisfaction, closeness, and prior disclosure about the problems discussed.

Method

Participants

The core group of participants (hereafter referred to as *the dating partners* or *the dating couple*) comprised 50 couples in premarital heterosexual relationships. At least one member of each couple attended the University of Canterbury. The mean age of the men and women was 22.9 years ($SD = 5.9$) and 21.7 years ($SD = 3.6$), respectively. Relationships had been in progress for a mean time of 16.5 months ($SD = 12.5$). Zero participants rated their relationships as casual, 14% as steady, 38% as serious, and 48% as living together.

Each dating couple recruited one individual who knew at least one of the partners well. This group (hereafter referred to as *the friends*) comprised 50 individuals, of whom 33 were female and 17 were male. These friends had known the female dating partner for a mean time of 80.2 months ($SD = 88.5$) and the male dating partner for 46.2 months ($SD = 62.3$). The mean age of the friends was 24.9 years ($SD = 10.5$).

The final group of participants comprised 25 female and 25 male students at the University of Canterbury (referred to as *the strangers*) who

did not know either of the dating partners. The mean age of the strangers was 22.2 years ($SD = 3.7$).²

Procedure

Session 1: Dating partners. Each dating partner completed sociodemographic and relationship satisfaction questionnaires and then listed two problems in their relationships that they considered serious or were experiencing conflict over. Two of these problems were then chosen by the experimenter to fairly reflect the perceptions of both partners. If the first-ranked problems were different, then both of these conflicts were selected as the two discussion topics. If the first-ranked problem was the same for each partner, this issue was selected. If the second-ranked problem also was the same for both partners, this problem was then chosen. However, if the second-ranked problem was different and the first-ranked problem was the same, the second discussion topic was selected at random. The experimenter then wrote down the two problems selected on a prepared sheet, which was left in plain view on a coffee table.

The videotaped interaction was set in a pleasantly furnished and spacious soundproof laboratory. Couples sat around the coffee table with microphones attached to their lapels while facing one another in two chairs positioned at right angles so that the wall-mounted camera could obtain a clear picture of both partners. An adjacent laboratory housed all the recording equipment (a microphone and intercom system, two connected videocassette recorders and two color television monitors).³

Partners were instructed to forget about the camera and to behave as naturally as possible, as if they were having the conversation in their own homes. Couples were asked to attempt as far as possible to resolve the problem being discussed. They were also assured that the room was soundproof and that their tapes and data would not be shown to anyone else without their permission. At this point, the experimenter left the room to start the video equipment, and couples were instructed to discuss each problem for 5 min. Two copies of the taped discussions were produced simultaneously, with a running count of the time elapsed electronically embedded in the corner of the screen.

Collection of thought–feeling data: Dating partners. The procedures used in the next two phases of the research were based on those developed by Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, and Garcia (1990a, 1990b) and modified by Fletcher and Fitness (1990) and Thomas et al. (1997) for specific application to relationship problem-solving discussions. After completing their discussions, couples were separated and partners were moved to separate soundproof laboratories and informed that they were going to independently review a videotape of their discussion. Partners were instructed that whenever they could recall experiencing a particular thought or feeling, they should (a) stop the tape using the pause button on the remote control, (b) indicate the time elapsed in seconds, (c) write a clear and candid description of the specific thought or feeling they had experienced, and (d) restart the tape.

We stressed to partners that they were to describe only those thoughts and feelings that they could distinctly remember experiencing during the discussion and not to construct new thoughts and feelings. They were also assured that their partners would not gain access to information subsequently provided. A written summary of these instructions remained with each participant. After an initial practice session to become familiar with the equipment and the procedure, each partner was left to review the tape in privacy.

Collection of mind-reading data: Dating partners. For the second phase of the review procedure, the experimenter collected each partner's written statements and selected a maximum of 10 thoughts and feelings, transcribing the times at which these thoughts and feelings occurred. All partners satisfied the criteria of registering at least 3 thoughts and feelings and thus qualified for this second phase. Statements were selected in such a way as to ensure that there were roughly equal numbers of thoughts and feelings for each problem and that at least a 20-s interval was maintained between each statement. A list of the transcribed times was then exchanged between partners.

Each partner then played the tape again. This time the partners were instructed to pause the tape at each specified time and then to describe for the interaction immediately preceding that point, explicitly (in writing), (a) what they themselves were thinking or feeling and (b) what they believed their partners were thinking or feeling.

Session 2: Dating partners. Between 5 and 9 days later, dating partners returned to the laboratory and independently viewed a videotape, generated during an earlier study by Thomas et al. (1997), of two married couples (who were unknown to the participants) discussing a relationship problem for 5 min each.⁴

After a brief description of the nature of each discussion problem, the dating partners were instructed to watch the first discussion, pausing the tape at each of the three specified points at which the wife had previously reported having had a thought or feeling, and infer (in writing) the content of those thoughts and feelings. Dating partners then watched the first discussion again and inferred the content of the husband's three thoughts and feelings. The same procedure was repeated for the second 5-min discussion, but on this occasion the husband's three thoughts and feelings were inferred prior to the wife's three thoughts and feelings. Finally, dating partners were debriefed and thanked for their participation in the study. They were also asked to give their written consent to permit a nominated friend and a stranger to view their videotaped problem-solving discussion. All dating partners complied with this request and gave their assurance that they would not talk to the nominated friend about any of the details of the study.

Sessions 1 and 2: Friends. Two to 3 weeks after the dating couples' second session, friends came into the laboratory and completed sociodemographic, disclosure, and closeness questionnaires. Following a detailed explanation by the experimenter of the next (mind-reading inference) phase, friends twice viewed the 10-min videotapes (comprising two 5-min discussions of each problem) of the couple who nominated them (once for each partner). The order of inferring the male and female dating partner's thoughts and feelings was counterbalanced within sex. On each viewing, friends paused the tape at those points where the designated dating partner had reported particular thoughts and feelings and then inferred the content of those thoughts and feelings. (Unlike the dating partners, they did not report their own thoughts and feelings.) Approximately 1 week later, the friends returned for a second session in which they inferred the thoughts and feelings of the married couples (whom the participants did not know) using the same procedure as described above for the dating partners.

Sessions 1 and 2: Strangers. Each stranger was randomly assigned one dating couple's videotape. In addition, they all viewed the same married-couple videotapes that both the dating couples and the friends viewed. At the beginning of each session, the experimenter ensured that the strangers did not know either the dating couple or the married couples on the videotapes. Strangers initially completed a sociodemographic scale. For Session 1, the mind-reading task related to the dating partners, and for Session 2, it concerned the married couples. The mind-reading procedures in both cases were exactly as described previously for the friends.

² Participants in this study also completed scales not mentioned in the following *Method* section (and the dating couples completed one additional videotaped 5-min discussion). Data from these additional sources, which concern accuracy in trait attributions and individual-difference correlates of mind-reading ability, have been reported elsewhere (Thomas & Fletcher, 2000, 2001). The data and results reported here have not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere.

³ Before discussing their relationship problems, partners participated in a brief videotaped debate. This was designed to make the couple feel comfortable with the later videotaping and was also used to gather additional data reported elsewhere (Thomas & Fletcher, 2001).

⁴ Prior permission was obtained from these marital couples to use their tapes as stimulus material.

Design

The design of perceiver and target relationships for Session 1 of this study is depicted in Figure 1. The level of the relationship (dating partner vs. friend vs. stranger) was treated as a between-groups variable. The male and female dating partners were the active participants, with each dating partner serving as both a perceiver and as a target. In contrast, friends and strangers served only as perceivers who observed the dating couples' interactions.

Figure 2 portrays the design of the perceiver–target relationships for Session 2. On this occasion, the three groups of participants acted solely as perceivers who observed the unknown married couples' interactions. The husbands and wives, in this case, were the active participants and served only as targets. Thus, for this session, in all cases the targets were unknown to the perceivers.

Measures

Relationship satisfaction. This six-item questionnaire comprises four global judgments on 7-point Likert-type scales that measure perceptions of relationship happiness, love, general relationship satisfaction, commitment, relationship stability, and conflict. This scale (completed by the dating partners only) has shown good reliability and validity in previous research (Fletcher & Fitness, 1990; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). It attained an overall internal reliability coefficient of .88 in this study.

Relationship closeness. Friends described their friendship with each dating partner, using the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This single-item scale consists of a series of seven overlapping circles, ranging from no self–other overlap to extensive self–other overlap, from which participants selected the picture that best described their relationships with the male and female dating partner. The IOS Scale measures both feelings of closeness and behaviors associated with closeness and has demonstrated good reliability and validity (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001).

Disclosure between the friend and the dating partners. The friend rated two statements for each problem concerning the frequency of previous problem-specific discussions between the friend and the dating partners: "How often have you talked with the male dating partner about this problem in their romantic relationship?" and "How often have you talked with the female dating partner about this problem in their romantic relationship?" Seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from *not at all* to *very often* accompanied these items. Square-root transformations were computed on each item because of their negatively skewed distributions. Disclosure between the male partner and the friend, and between the female partner and the friend, positively correlated across the two problems ($r_s = .56$ and $.70$, respectively). Hence, two summed variables were created to represent prior disclosure between the friend and the male dating partner and between the friend and the female dating partner.

Observer ratings of shared cognitive focus, assumed similarity, and empathic accuracy. Two coders estimated the degree of similarity between perceivers' and targets' statements by independently examining the taped discussions in conjunction with the thought and feeling protocols. A 3-point scale was used, where 1 = *essentially different content*, 2 = *somewhat similar, but not the same, content*, and 3 = *essentially the same content* (see Ickes et al., 1990b; Thomas et al., 1997). Coders' comparisons of the thought–feeling data yielded three separate measures: shared cognitive focus, assumed similarity, and empathic accuracy. The same coding criteria were used in this study as developed by Thomas et al. (1997).

The shared cognitive focus score was based on the actual similarity between the content of the thoughts and feelings of each partner at the same points on the tape. Coders calculated the score by considering the degree to which the same topic was being addressed, ignoring whether the same partner was being referred to or whether the thoughts and feelings were in agreement. For example, if the woman reported that she was unhappy with the division of household labor and the man reported that he was happy with the division of household labor, these statements would have obtained

the maximum shared cognitive focus score of 3. If instead, using the same case, the man reported he was thinking about his car or his partner's tendency to interrupt him, then that would have received a score of 1. The use of relatively liberal criteria for assessing similarity across partners was based on our measurement goal, which was to assess the extent to which both partners were mentally focusing on the same topic (e.g., division of labor).

The assumed similarity score indicated the similarity between the content of each partner's self-reported thoughts and feelings and his or her inference regarding the partner's thoughts and feelings. The criteria here were similar to those used for shared cognitive focus.

The mind-reading accuracy score characterized the extent to which each target's self-attributed thoughts and feelings matched the content of the perceiver's inference. The associated rating used more stringent criteria than the previous two ratings: Partners needed to be accurate in terms of whether the target attribution was to (a) self or partner or (b) content (which included the evaluative nature of the attribution). For example, to obtain the maximum score of 3 for the woman's thought that she was angry about the division of household labor, then the man needed to state this; a statement that she was happy with the division of labor or that she was angry over his insensitivity received a score of 2. Our reasons for adopting more stringent standards (than the assumed similarity and shared cognitive focus tasks) are related to the demands of the specific judgment task. Almost anyone (partner or stranger) could reasonably guess that the partner is thinking or feeling something in relation to the task under discussion (e.g., division of labor). Thus, our criteria helped to avoid ceiling effects and also conceptually matched the definitions of the variables being assessed.

There is nothing to suggest that such a coding scheme artifactually produces correlations among these three constructs. Consistent with this point, in the current study the correlations among shared cognitive focus, assumed similarity, and accuracy were similar to those reported in Thomas et al. (1997), varying from $-.04$ to $.45$ for the men and from $.05$ to $.45$ for the women. Prior research has also established that all three ratings are reliable, with evidence of convergent and discriminant validity in addition to predictive validity (Thomas et al., 1997).

Coders' judgments in this study yielded adequate interrater reliabilities using correlations: $.74$ for shared cognitive focus, $.75$ for assumed similarity, $.79$ for dating partner mind-reading accuracy, $.79$ for friend mind-reading accuracy, and $.76$ for stranger mind-reading accuracy. The interrater reliability for mind-reading accuracy of the unknown married couples (with all three groups of perceivers combined) was $.87$. All disagreements were resolved by discussion and while reexamining the taped interactions. The final ratings for each perceiver were summed and divided by the number of inferences made to provide mean summary scores for each construct. These ratings were then converted to percentages for ease of readability.

Behavioral diagnosticity. Adopting a procedure outlined by Simpson et al. (1995), two coders independently read each target's initial self-attributed thought–feeling statements used in the mind-reading coding task in conjunction with viewing each dating couple's videotaped discussion, stopping the tape at the times indicated on the thought–feeling protocols. On the basis of the verbal and nonverbal information conveyed in the 30 s of the interaction prior to the reported occurrence of each thought or feeling, coders rated how difficult it would have been for an observer to accurately infer the content of the target's thoughts and feelings. These ratings were made on a 3-point scale, where 1 = *relatively difficult to accurately infer the thought–feeling*, 2 = *neither particularly easy nor difficult to accurately infer the thought–feeling*, and 3 = *relatively easy to infer the thought–feeling* (for more details, see Simpson et al., 1995; Thomas et al., 1997).

Raters achieved a high level of interrater reliability across all entries ($r = .87$). The few disagreements that occurred were resolved by discussion and while reexamining the taped interactions. These final ratings were

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of the Major Variables for All Perceivers, and Correlations Between Dating Partners

Variable	Perceiver				
	Dating partners		<i>r</i>	Friends (<i>n</i> = 50)	Strangers (<i>n</i> = 50)
	Men (<i>n</i> = 50)	Women (<i>n</i> = 50)			
Observer-based ratings					
Mind-reading dating partners (%)					
Male targets	—	54 (17)	.37*	42 (18)	38 (17)
Female targets	47 (16)	—	.37*	43 (17)	40 (21)
Mind-reading unknown married partners (%)					
Married male targets	41 (14)	49 (11)	.26	42 (13)	40 (17)
Married female targets	42 (14)	47 (16)	.15	44 (15)	40 (21)
Shared cognitive focus (%)	68 (18)	71 (18)	.34*	—	—
Assumed similarity (%)	60 (19)	61 (17)	.46*	—	—
Behavioral diagnosticity	4.48 (0.89)	4.39 (0.96)	-.21	—	—
Self-reports					
Relationship satisfaction of dating partners	4.90 (0.69)	4.31 (0.61)	.58*	—	—
Disclosure between friend and male dating partner	—	—	—	3.04 (0.90)	—
Disclosure between friend and female dating partner	—	—	—	3.87 (1.08)	—
Closeness between friend and male dating partner	—	—	—	3.52 (1.80)	—
Closeness between friend and female dating partner	—	—	—	4.50 (1.66)	—

Note. Except for the percentage variables, all figures were converted to a 7-point scale to improve readability. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Dashes indicate data were not provided (see Method section).

* $p < .05$.

tallied for each target and divided by the total number of thought–feeling entries analyzed to produce mean behavioral diagnosticity ratings.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for the major variables in this study. The significant positive correlation between dating partners for shared cognitive focus is derived from two scores obtained from separate parts of the same taped conflict discussion. Scores for both men and women, therefore, represent variables that are inherently couple-level scores. Accordingly, these two variables were combined for subsequent analyses to represent shared cognitive focus for each dating couple. In addition, as expected, correlations between dating partners exhibited moderate levels of concordance for mind reading, assumed similarity, and relationship satisfaction. The problem of the lack of independence across partners for these variables was handled in different ways, depending on the analysis in question (more details are provided below).⁵

The findings (see Table 1) for the friends and strangers revealed that the mind-reading scores across the four targets in question (dating partner man, dating partner woman, unknown wife, and unknown husband) were very similar, although the friend's figures were slightly, but consistently, higher. In addition, friends reported

higher levels of disclosure and closeness to the female partners than the male partners (although the overall mean levels on both variables were moderate); both dependent $t(49) > 2.78$, $ps < .001$.

The Nature of the Relationship and Sex Differences

It was predicted that (a) mind-reading accuracy would improve as a function of increased intimacy and knowledge, and (b) women would achieve higher levels of mind-reading accuracy compared with men. To test these hypotheses a 3 (stranger vs. friend vs. dating partner) \times 2 (female perceiver vs. male perceiver) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated, with perceivers' mind-reading accuracy scores for the dating partner(s) as the dependent variable. Couple-level mind-reading accuracy scores were used as the dependent variable for both friends and strangers, whereas for dating partners, partner-level mind-reading accuracy scores were used.

The relevant data, depicted in Figure 3, supported our predictions. The analysis revealed significant main effects for acquaint-

⁵ All the within-sex and across-partner analyses were also tested using a SEM approach, which is more sophisticated because it simultaneously controls for within-partner and across-partner effects. The results were very similar to those reported.

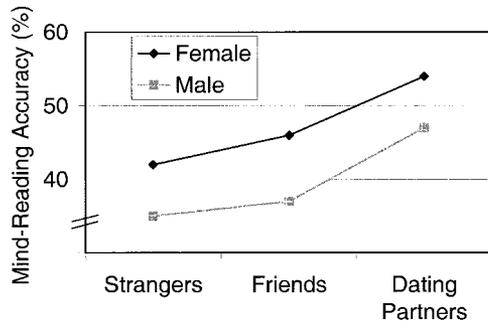


Figure 3. Mean mind-reading accuracy scores for partners as targets across male and female perceivers who were strangers, friends, or partners.

tanceship, $F(2, 194) = 11.66, p < .001$, and sex of perceiver, $F(1, 194) = 10.21, p < .001$. Planned comparisons revealed that dating partners attained significantly higher levels of mind-reading accuracy ($M = 50.65\%$) than both friends ($M = 41.18\%, p < .005$) and strangers ($M = 38.95\%, p < .001$). The mean difference between friends and strangers, however, was not significant. In addition, female perceivers were generally, and significantly, more accurate when inferring the thoughts and feelings of the dating partner(s) ($M = 47.38\%$) than were male perceivers ($M = 39.81\%$). Moreover, there was no hint of an interaction between acquaintanceship and sex of the perceiver, $F(2, 294) = .12, ns$.⁶

Sex of the target could not be included as an independent variable in the prior analysis because for dating partners it was confounded with sex of the perceiver. However, we tested the role of the target's sex in two further ways. First, we analyzed the mind-reading accuracy data from the friends and strangers only with a 2 (female perceiver vs. male perceiver) \times 2 (friends vs. strangers) \times 2 (female dating target vs. male dating target) ANOVA, with the last factor a within-subjects variable. Consistent with the prior analysis, a significant main effect revealed that women did better at mind-reading than the men (female perceivers = 44%, male perceivers = 36%); $F(1, 96) = 7.86, p < .001$. However, no other main effects or interactions were significant (all F s < 1.0). This analysis shows that the sex of the target did not influence the mind-reading performance of the friends or the strangers.

Next, we turned to the dating partners' mind-reading performance. One explanation for the superior performance of the dating women is that men are harder to read than women, rather than that women in relationships are better mind readers than men. To test this explanation, we first set up the data so that we correlated sex of dating partner perceiver (coded as a dummy variable with women = 1 and men = 0) with mind-reading accuracy scores. Consistent with all prior analyses, women daters were significantly better mind readers than men ($r = .29, p < .05$). Then, we recalculated the correlation but partialled out the relevant behavioral diagnosticity ratings (the female diagnosticity ratings being paired with the male mind-reading scores and vice versa; see Table 1). The partial correlation was unchanged ($r = .29, p < .05$). This analysis again suggests (albeit indirectly) that what matters, in terms of mind-reading performance, is the sex of the perceiver rather than the sex of the target.

We also wished to test whether women's superior mind reading was maintained over men's when perceiving the unknown married

couples in Session 2 of this study. Before doing so, the mind-reading scores were correlated across the male and female married targets within all four groups of perceivers (male dating partner, female dating partner, friend, and stranger). The four correlations ranged from .31 to .54 and were all significant at the $p < .05$ level. Thus, the mind-reading scores were summed across the male and female married targets. We then calculated an independent t test, comparing the mind-reading of the unknown married targets between the men and women perceivers (using the full sample of 200 participants). Consistent with the previous results, female perceivers were better mind readers ($M = 46.47\%$) than male perceivers ($M = 39.21\%$), $t(198) = 3.49, p < .001$.

Note that the perceivers at all three levels of acquaintanceship judged the same target; therefore, differences across the targets' readability cannot account for the acquaintanceship effect. However, given that judges were not randomly assigned to each group, one alternative explanation for this effect is in terms of dispositional qualities of the perceiver that could plausibly covary both with levels of intimacy and knowledge and mind-reading accuracy (e.g., general mind-reading ability). A strong test of this alternative explanation is to perform the same ANOVA already reported but to control for the perceivers' mind-reading accuracy scores of the unknown married couples. When this was done, the critical main effect for acquaintanceship remained significant, $F(2, 193) = 9.67, p < .001$. This analysis indicates that the relationship effect is robust and is not simply a function of individual differences in mind-reading ability that happens to be related to group membership.

Individual Differences in Target's Readability

Recall that two target-related hypotheses were advanced in this study. The first hypothesis was that the good target across the full range of acquaintanceship (i.e. dating partners, friends, and strangers) would be relatively muted. The second prediction was that the lack of strong individual differences in target's readability might be explained by Thomas and Fletcher's (1997) argument that perceiver's reliance on face-valid observational data to drive their judgments should decrease with greater intimacy and local knowledge. To initially test the first hypothesis, we computed an intraclass correlation of the three groups of perceivers' mind-reading accuracy scores for the male and the female dating partner respectively (for computational details, see Kenny & La Voie, 1985). As expected, there was relatively weak evidence of substantive overall consensus between the dating partner, the friend, and the stranger when perceiving either the male target, intraclass $r(49) = .23, ns$, or the female target, intraclass $r(49) = .12, ns$.

⁶ Analyzing these data is problematic, given that the mind-reading scores for the dating partners are dependent but not the data from the friends or strangers. Using an overall ANOVA provides an elegant solution but entails that the main sex effect is an overly conservative estimate, although it turned out to be statistically significant (as predicted). However, when the dating partners' mind-reading scores were analyzed separately, the female dating partners were still significantly superior to the male dating partners, using a dependent t test, $t(49) = 2.80, p < .01$. Similarly, when the friends' and strangers' mind-reading scores were reanalyzed with a 2 \times 2 ANOVA, a significant main effect revealed that women did better at mind reading than the men, with no other main effects or interactions significant (see details in text). In short, the same significant pattern of results is produced regardless of which analytic strategy is adopted.

To test the second hypothesis, perceivers' mind-reading accuracy scores were correlated with the diagnosticity of the targets' behavior. As expected, the general pattern of correlations shown in Table 2 suggests that as intimacy and local knowledge increased, perceivers' use of behavioral information decreased. The one exception to this trend was the moderate correlation between female partner's mind-reading accuracy and the male partner's behavioral diagnosticity.

To carry out a more fine-grained analysis of individual differences in target readability, correlations were calculated between the mind-reading accuracy scores of all three groups (for the male dating partner and the female dating partner respectively). The results are shown in Table 3. As can be seen, significant and substantial positive consensus between mind-reading accuracy scores was attained by the dating partner and the friend when perceiving the male target, but not for the other five analyses. This one significant correlation was significantly larger (at the two-tailed level; $z > 1.96, p < .05$) than only two out of the other five correlations. Nevertheless, these results suggest that at least for well-acquainted female perceivers, the good target might well exist, contrary to the general hypothesis advanced previously.

Individual Differences in Perceivers' Mind-Reading Ability

Another possible moderator of mind-reading accuracy is an underlying ability component of the judge that generalizes across targets. We have already reported evidence of such an ability component—specifically, the moderate positive correlations between mind-reading scores of the unknown married male and female targets for all groups of perceivers (dating partners, friends, and strangers). In a similar vein, we found that friends' and strangers' mind-reading scores of the male and female dating partners were also positively and significantly correlated (.38 and .36, respectively). However, a sterner test of the perceiver's general mind-reading ability is whether consistent performance is maintained across substantially different perceiver–target relationships. Thus, we correlated (within each perceiver group) the participants' mind-reading scores across the dating partner(s) and the married couples (who were unknown targets for all groups of perceivers).

As can be seen in Table 4, the highest level of cross-target consistency occurred when perceivers judged two targets whom they did not know. However, moderate to substantial cross-target

Table 2
Zero-Order Correlations Between the Diagnosticity of Behavior and Mind-Reading Accuracy Scores Attained by Dating Partners, Friends, and Strangers

Perceiver	Target	
	Male dating partner	Female dating partner
Male dating partner	—	.22
Female dating partner	.41*	—
Friend	.39*	.38*
Stranger	.54*	.65*

Note. $n = 50$ for each correlation.
* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Zero-Order Correlations Between Mind-Reading Accuracy Scores Across Different Perceiver Groups With the Male and Female Dating Partners as Targets

Perceiver	Consensus	
	Male dating partner as target	Female dating partner as target
Dating partners–friends	.50*	.22
Dating partners–strangers	.25	.06
Friends–strangers	.25	.12

Note. $n = 50$ for each correlation.
* $p < .05$.

stability was also produced when the levels of acquaintanceship with each target were quite different (e.g., stranger vs. relationship partner). These analyses show the existence of individual differences in mind-reading performance, but they do not elucidate the underlying processes involved. To this task we now turn.

Predictors of Mind-Reading Performance of Dating Partners and Friends

Table 5 presents the correlations of the predictor variables within the various groups of perceivers and with their mind-reading scores for the dating couples and strangers as targets. Replicating Thomas et al. (1997), higher levels of shared cognitive focus (indexed by similarity across partners in the content of the online thoughts and feelings) were significantly related to more accurate mind-reading for both male and female daters. For the dating men, no other variables significantly predicted their mind-reading performance. However, unexpectedly, for the dating women, higher levels of disclosure and closeness to the nominated friend significantly predicted accuracy in their mind reading. In addition, higher levels of relationship satisfaction for the dating women predicted superior mind-reading accuracy.

For the friends, the extent to which they reported disclosure and closeness to the male dating partners did not predict the accuracy of their mind-reading of the male dating partner. However, as predicted, higher levels of disclosure and closeness of the friends

Table 4
Correlations Between Perceiver's Mind-Reading Accuracy Scores for Dating Partner(s) and Perceiver's Mind-Reading Accuracy Scores for Unknown Married Couples

Perceivers	Cross-target r
Male dating partners	.42*
Female dating partners	.46*
Friends	.32*
Strangers	.71*

Note. The married mind-reading scores were summed across the male and female targets for every group of perceiver. For the friends and strangers perceiver groups, the mind-reading scores were summed across the male and female dating partners to produce one score. For the male and female dating partners, the dating partner mind-reading score (of necessity) was composed of their score for their partner only. $n = 50$ for each correlation.
* $p < .05$.

Table 5
Zero-Order Correlations of Predictor Variables With Mind-Reading Performance for Dating Partners and Friends, With Both Dating Partners and Unknown Married Couples as Targets

Perceiver	Mind-reading targets			
	Female dating partner	Male dating partner	Dating couple	Unknown married couples
Male dating partners				
Assumed similarity	.00	—	—	.00
Shared cognitive focus	.45*	—	—	.02
Disclosure to friend	.11 (.11)	—	—	.02
Closeness to friend	.08 (.10)	—	—	.07
Relationship satisfaction	.04 (–.11)	—	—	–.05
Female dating partners				
Assumed similarity	—	.05	—	.07
Shared cognitive focus	—	.45*	—	.22
Disclosure to friend	—	.54* (.55*)	—	.18
Closeness to friend	—	.37* (.36*)	—	.19
Relationship satisfaction	—	.27* (.28*)	—	.15
Friends				
Disclosure with male partner	–.17	.11	–.03	.08
Disclosure with female partner	.35*	.52*	.53*	.19
Closeness to male partner	–.08	.03	–.03	.07
Closeness to female partner	.23	.49*	.44*	–.15

Note. The closeness and disclosure variables between friends and dating partners were derived from the friends' self-reports. The correlations in parentheses are partial correlations with the following variables controlled for: length of relationship, assumed similarity for both men and women, and the relevant partner variable (see text). $n = 50$ for each correlation.

* $p < .05$.

to the female partner significantly predicted higher levels of mind-reading accuracy for the dating couple (both for male and female targets). These results (remarkably) parallel those previously described in this article concerned with predicting the mind-reading accuracy of the dating partners.

As reported in the *Method* section, the friends of the couples had known the female dating partners for much longer than the male dating partners (80.2 months as against 46.2 months). To test the possible role of the length of the relationship between friends and partners, all the correlations between the friends and the dating partners in Table 5 were recalculated, partialing out the length of the partner–friend relationship. All the correlations were unchanged, which suggests that it is the quality of these relationships that counted rather than the length per se.

Table 5 also shows, as we expected, that none of these relationship-based variables predicted mind-reading accuracy of the unknown married couples. These results add valuable discriminant validity to the significant findings and suggest that the power of variables such as shared cognitive focus, disclosure, and relationship satisfaction are tied to relationship-level processes and are not simply a function of their association with generalized mind-reading ability.

As pointed out previously, the fact that these variables are, in some cases, significantly correlated across partners renders interpretation of the zero-order correlations problematic. Thus, we recalculated the correlations but partialled out the relevant variables derived from the other partner. For example, we recalculated the .54 correlation between the female dating partner's mind-reading score and her disclosure to her friend while controlling for her male partner's disclosure to the same friend. At the same time, we controlled for the length of the relationship and both male and

female levels of assumed similarity for all analyses. As can be seen in Table 5, the partial correlations (reported in the parentheses) remained virtually unchanged. Thus, none of these results were a function of the partner's scores on the relevant variables, length of relationship, or assumed similarity.

Next, we reanalyzed the set of predictor variables shown in Table 5, using multiple regression procedures, to determine whether there were any significant partner effects with respect to mind-reading accuracy; for example, does the female's relationship satisfaction influence the male's mind-reading accuracy, over and above the effect of the male's relationship satisfaction (or vice versa)? These analyses revealed no significant partner effects (β s ranged from $-.17$ to $.21$, $ps > .23$).

Finally, we addressed the question posed above concerning whether the link between relationship satisfaction and mind-reading accuracy might be moderated by the length of the relationship. We used a standard multiple regression strategy, with the mind-reading scores of either the male or female dating partners as the dependent variables, and entered relationship length (with a log transformation to correct skew) and relationship satisfaction as the main effects and their product as the interaction term. The independent variables were centered prior to these analyses (in the standard fashion) to avoid computational problems (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The interaction terms explained significant amounts of variance controlling for the main effects for both men, $t(1, 49) = 2.43$, $p < .02$, and women, $t(1, 49) = 2.73$, $p < .01$.

The nature of these significant interactions is shown in Figure 4, setting relationship satisfaction and relationship length at one standard deviation above and below their respective means. For male and female daters, those in longer relationships attained higher levels of mind-reading accuracy the more satisfied they

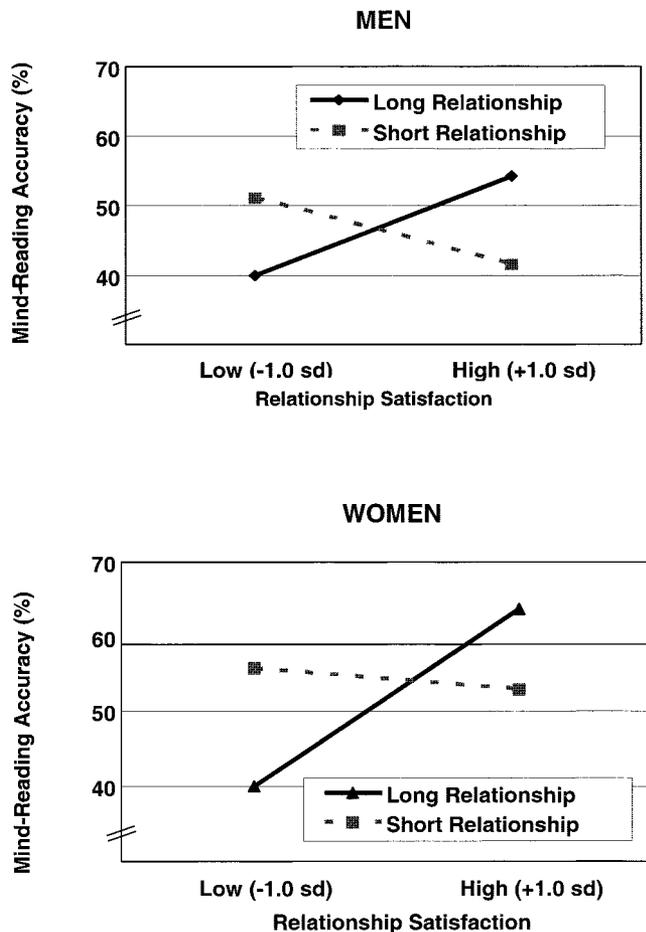


Figure 4. The links between mind-reading accuracy and relationship satisfaction, as moderated by relationship length, for both male and female dating partners. sd = standard deviation.

were with the relationship. In contrast, for shorter relationships, partners who were more satisfied achieved lower levels of mind-reading accuracy.

Various explanations for these findings were then tested by recalculating the tests of the interactions while simultaneously controlling for other variables. We tested in turn the possible roles of assumed similarity, shared cognitive focus, disclosure to friend, closeness to friend, and behavioral diagnosticity. In no case did controlling for these variables reduce the significant interaction terms to nonsignificant levels. Finally, we controlled for the following partner-level variables: relationship satisfaction, assumed similarity, disclosure to friend, and closeness to friend. For example, we recalculated the original moderating analysis predicting male mind-reading accuracy but included relationship satisfaction of the men's female partners as an additional predictor variable. Again, all the interaction terms remained significant. None of these analyses explain the results, but they do point to the role of other unmeasured variables as causal factors.

Discussion

This research suggests that causal factors related to the relationship, the judge, and the target all contribute to the accuracy of

mind-reading in intimate relationship contexts. However, the contributions of these categories tended to interact with one another, with the nature of the relationship between perceiver and target exerting the most profound effects. Mind-reading generally improved as a function of increased intimacy and local knowledge, with dating partners achieving superior accuracy to both friends and strangers. Moreover, perceivers' reliance on face-valid diagnostic behavior decreased as a function of increased acquaintanceship, which implies that target judgments become less data based and more theory driven in intimate relationships. The influence of target readability was also found to vary according to the nature of the judge-target relationship, with strong evidence for individual differences in male (but not female) target readability emerging only at moderate to high levels of relationship intimacy.

Compelling evidence was also found for individual differences in judges' mind-reading abilities that were independent of both target-based and relationship-based moderators of mind-reading, and women were consistently better performers than men. Yet here again, features of the relationship between the perceivers and the targets predicted mind-reading accuracy. Friends who were closer to dating partners and had discussed the problems more extensively with the female dating partners were markedly superior in their mind readings of both male and female dating partners. However, the amounts of closeness and disclosure between the friends and the male dating partners were unrelated to the friends' mind-reading performance. Remarkably, the same pattern of findings was true for the daters; more extensive conversations with the friends also substantially improved the accuracy with which the female (but again, not the male) daters performed when reading their partners' minds.

Finally, the length of the relationship moderated the link between relationship satisfaction and mind-reading accuracy, with a positive association found between relationship satisfaction and mind-reading accuracy for both men and women in long relationships and a negative association between the two constructs for men and women in short relationships.

These findings have important implications for the explanation and understanding of mind-reading accuracy, to which we now turn.

The Relationship

An important novel contribution of this study was to demonstrate that mind-reading accuracy does not plateau at the level of friendship but goes up a notch in the context of intimate romantic relationships. Nevertheless, our findings concur with a number of studies that have demonstrated acquaintanceship effects in both mind reading and personality domains (for a review, see Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997), and they are consistent with RAM's (Funder, 1995) theoretical postulate that the availability of "good information" is a basic moderator of judgment accuracy.

A social cognitive account appears to provide the most parsimonious explanation for this finding. Although intimates and strangers alike have access to the behavioral data evinced during the interaction as well as to their more general relationship-relevant theories, dating partners possess unique and detailed local relationship theories forged over a history of intimate interactions with their dating partner (Fletcher, 2002; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). Such local theories often include information that has been shared in previous interactions about the specific problems that

were discussed. Insider knowledge of this sort is clearly inaccessible to strangers and is probably available to a more limited extent to friends. This account is bolstered by two findings. First, perceivers' use of the face-valid behavioral data decreased as acquaintanceship increased. Second, the advantage possessed by the dating partners remained robust after controlling for the mind-reading performance attained by all groups when mind reading the married couples (whom none of the participants knew).

There are at least two reasons why reliance on local relationship theories should provide a competitive advantage. First, local theories may help to detect, interpret, and supplement the face-valid behavioral information generated during the interaction. For example, idiosyncratic behavior that is meaningless to less acquainted judges, such as a fleeting downward glance or a slightly elevated voice tone, may be highly informative to partners because it is interpreted in light of preexistent specific relationship knowledge structures. Second, a critical feature of close relationships is the extent to which partners provide diagnostic feedback and disclosure to each other concerning their reactions to the situations and events that they mutually experience (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Accordingly, intimates are likely to construct shared local theories or knowledge structures about the meaning of various kinds of relationship events and interactive behavior (Colvin et al., 1997). Thus, even in the absence of any behavioral cues, a woman may accurately attribute frustration to her dating partner on the basis of her detailed knowledge of his personality or more specific knowledge of his characteristic beliefs, attributions, and feelings concerning the particular relationship conflict being discussed (Thomas & Fletcher, 1997).

The power of the relationship, and of associated local theories, is also revealed in our novel findings that both the partner (but note: only the female partner) and the friend appeared to benefit in the accuracy of their mind readings from more intensive discussions about the problems under discussion. Previous research has documented the psychological gains obtained from increased self-disclosure about problems (e.g., Neiderhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002), but this is the first demonstration we are aware of that shows it is also associated with objective gains in accuracy in reading others' minds. This pattern of findings is consistent with previous findings that women are likely to provide friends with detailed and uncensored information about their emotional experiences and their relationships, whereas male talk tends to be relatively superficial, descriptive, and uninformative about deeper feelings, cognitions, and relationship interactions (Cross & Madson, 1997; Dindia & Allen, 1992).

Our findings imply that relationship insiders did not simply succumb to the tendency to adopt a Pollyannaish approach and assume their partners were thinking rosy thoughts and experiencing warm emotions. Even friends, who were presumably more likely to be objective and who possessed some knowledge about the relationship, were outshone by the partners in their ability to read minds. We did not code the positivity of the self-reported online cognitions in this study. However, three prior studies using the same thought listing and video-review paradigm, with couples discussing relationship problems, reported that from 62% to 88% of the targets' thoughts and feelings were negative, the remainder being positive or neutral (see Fletcher & Fitness, 1990; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Thomas et al., 1997). This pattern of results suggests that perceivers who primarily adopt a relationship-

enhancement approach are not likely to achieve stellar levels of mind-reading accuracy.

A critical element in determining the accuracy of mind reading is likely to be the combination of the goals of the judge and the threat posed to the relationship (Fletcher, 2002; Ickes & Simpson, 2001). On the one hand, couples were asked by the experimenter to resolve the problems under discussion, which may prompt a realistic, truth-seeking motivational set. On the other hand, such discussions can be threatening to the relationship and motivate strong emotional responses, which may push partners toward a relationship-enhancement mental set.

Recall that for both men and women in relatively short relationships, relationship satisfaction was negatively related to mind-reading accuracy, but relationship satisfaction was positively related to mind-reading accuracy in longer relationships. We ruled out quite a range of plausible variables (related to self or partner) that might have accounted for these findings—namely, assumed similarity, shared cognitive focus, disclosure to the friend, closeness to the friend, and behavioral diagnosticity. One plausible explanation is related to the level of threat involved (see Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al., 2003). That is, in relationships that had been going on for less than 11 months (50% of the dating sample), the problems might not have been discussed much previously, and the high level of threat might have motivated those in more satisfying relationships to produce rosier but less accurate mind readings. In contrast, couples in relationships of a longer duration (many of whom were living together) may have had more experience in resolving problems, especially with the specific problems that were actually discussed.⁷ If, for these couples, anxiety and perceived threat were low or moderate, then those with higher levels of relationship satisfaction might have been more strongly motivated to produce effective solutions to the problems, with correspondingly more accurate mind readings. This speculation warrants further investigation.

The Target

As expected, individual differences in target's readability were relatively muted across different levels of the relationship with the target, as evidenced by a relatively weak overall consensus among the mind-reading scores produced by the three classes of perceivers when judging the same targets. On the other hand, when attention was restricted to mind reading generated solely by well-acquainted perceivers, some evidence for the good target was revealed. Specifically, some male (but not female) targets were more accurately judged by their dating partner and friend than were others. This result is generally consistent with research in the trait accuracy domain that has demonstrated individual differences in target judgability mainly within the confines of relatively long-standing friendships (e.g., Colvin, 1993a, 1993b).

The question arises why target effects occurred for men but not for women (in dating relationships) as targets. Two relevant findings, taken together, suggest an explanation. First, our results show

⁷ We also tested the possibility that living together ($n = 24$ couples) versus not living together ($n = 26$ couples) might moderate the link between mind-reading accuracy and relationship satisfaction. This analysis revealed no evidence that relationship status played any moderating role for either men or women ($t_s < 1.0$), which further implicates the role of relationship length.

that female dating partners and friends relied on data-driven judgments to a similar extent when reading the male target, whereas male dating partners and friends were quite discrepant in their use of behavioral information when reading the female target. Second, female dating partners confided more to their friends about their relationship problems than did male dating partners, and more disclosure (and perceived closeness) predicted better mind-reading performance for the women partners and friends but not for the male partners and friends.

This evidence implies that female dating partners and friends tend to construct shared local relationship theories regarding the relationship and its problems to a greater extent than the male dating partners. This, in turn, would explain the higher level of consensus between the mind reading attained by female partners and friends compared with that of male partners and friends. This explanation is consistent with well-established sex differences in the self-disclosure literature that have been previously noted (Cross & Madson, 1997; Dindia & Allen, 1992).

The Judge

Why does our research provide such compelling evidence for individual differences in mind-reading ability? Three features of our research may be pivotal. First, our research design used multiple targets, which allows the effect of the judge to be disentangled from that of the target and the judge–target relationship (Kenny, 1994). Second, the nature of the mind-reading task in this research was relatively complex and difficult, but not impossible. If research tasks are overly easy or incredibly difficult, this militates against finding evidence of individual differences. Third, the nature of the task may need to be quite motivating in order for individual differences in mind-reading ability to emerge.

Identifying the existence of strong individual differences in mind-reading ability is, however, more straightforward than determining what characteristics predict the good (or bad) mind reader. Our findings show that gender was one such factor. Female judges at each level of acquaintanceship attained higher levels of mind-reading accuracy than did male judges. Moreover, this effect remained robust when the gender of the target was controlled for, and it did not appear to be a function of differences in the difficulty of mind reading men versus women as targets. These results are consistent with the thesis that women are more expert lay psychologists than are men, especially in the domain of intimate relationships (Fletcher, 2002). However, caution needs to be exercised in drawing general conclusions, given that this study used one kind of mind-reading task and that mind-reading performance has often not produced gender differences, especially with unknown targets (see Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000; Simpson et al., 2003).

A recent study by Klein and Hodges (2001) found that the superiority of women over men (in mind-reading accuracy) disappeared when participants were highly motivated to produce accurate results (such as when being paid for achieving accuracy). These authors suggested that sex differences in mind reading are tied to motivation rather than derived from differences in ability. However, their findings were obtained after participants interacted with strangers; we suggest that they may not be replicated in intimate relationship contexts. We agree that motivation is almost certainly an important component of sex differences in mind-reading accuracy or for any measure of social intelligence. However, it is difficult to disentangle motivation from ability when

analyzing the long-term development of expertise. Female mind readers in intimate relationships, strong chess players, and good mathematicians develop elaborate schemas, theories, and expertise over time (in their respective domains) as a function, in part, of high levels of motivation.

A meta-analysis by Davis and Kraus (1997) of general accuracy research (mainly with traits as the criteria) reported that higher verbal IQ and more complex and sophisticated thinking styles (using a variety of measures) were the best individual difference predictors of better judgmental accuracy. In analyses of the current data, reported elsewhere (Thomas & Fletcher, 2000), we found that both attributional complexity (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986) and verbal IQ predicted mind-reading accuracy but (broadly consistent with our other results) only under certain conditions that were linked to both gender and the nature of the judge–target relationship. Individuals (especially women) who possessed rich and informative local theories about the target and were more attributionally complex produced more accurate mind readings. In contrast, higher verbal IQ predicted more accurate mind readings (for both men and women) but only when the target was unknown to the perceiver (IQ and attributional complexity were unrelated).

Our interpretation of these findings (supported by some mediational subsidiary analyses) was that higher levels of attributional complexity motivate people to develop richer and more accurate theories about the relationship but that more intellectual horsepower provides the edge when novel (and more difficult) mind-reading tasks are attempted with couples who are unknown to the perceiver. Whether our interpretation is correct or not, the way in which the nature of the perceiver–target relationship (and the task) appear to moderate the links between individual differences and accuracy may partly explain why reliably identifying the individual-difference correlates of the “good” (or “poor”) judge has presented such an apparently intractable problem for researchers (also see Ickes, Buysse, et al., 2000).

Conclusion

By systematically examining the relationship between the perceiver and the target, we were able in this research to disentangle the contributions made by the relationship, the target, and the judge in terms of mind-reading accuracy. All three moderators were found to play a role. However, the nature of the relationship between the judge and the target exerted the most profound effects, moderating the influence of the target and the judge in both expected and unexpected ways. It is increasingly clear from this (and other) research that understanding the causes of accuracy in interpersonal judgments requires paying close attention to the relationship between the judge and the target.

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