

# From Perceived Similarity of Ideals to Relationship Satisfaction: A Path Analysis Using Dyadic Data

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**Abstract Aim:** The purpose of this study is to develop, using the ideal standards model (with its five dimensions: warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, status-resources, intimacy-loyalty and passion) and dyadic data analysis, a complex model assessing the relationship between perceived ideal similarity and relationship satisfaction. **Material and Methods:** Couples completed measures about perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, importance of ideals, perception of the current partner/relationship, coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal and relationship satisfaction. **Results:** The fit indices for the proposed models are very good (GFI > .90, AGFI > .90, CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08, NFI > .90, CFI > .90) with the exception of status-resources dimension. As a result, it was eliminated from the analysis. Perceived similarity of ideals led to own (warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and passion) and partner (intimacy-loyalty) communication about those ideals. More communication about ideals led to own (warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, intimacy-loyalty) and partner (warmth-trustworthiness, passion) increased real-ideal discrepancy scores. These, in turn, motivated own (warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, intimacy-loyalty, passion) and partner (intimacy-loyalty) use of coping strategies to manage the discrepancies between actual and ideal partner/relationship. The use of coping strategies led to higher rate regarding own (warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, intimacy-loyalty, passion) and partner (intimacy-loyalty, passion) relationship satisfaction. **Conclusions:** Given the importance that ideal standards play in relationship/partner evaluation, it could be helpful to shed light on the processes that have an impact on relationships improving/deteriorating over time. Thus, the impact of perceived ideal similarity on marital satisfaction could be of particular interest.

**Keywords:** *ideal standards model, dyadic data analysis, perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, real-ideal discrepancies, coping strategies, relationship satisfaction*

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## 1. Introduction

More often than not, each of us enter in a romantic relationships with an already established image of the ideal partner/relationship. According to some studies of Fletcher et al, judgments and perceptions of relationships depend on these mental images [9,10]. The authors posit that "partner and relationship ideals will include chronically accessible knowledge structures that are likely to predate – and be causally related to – judgments and decisions made in ongoing relationships". In a series of studies, the authors found that the ideal partner factors are *warmth-trustworthiness*, *vitality-attractiveness* and *status-resources*, while relationship ideals are defined by two factors: *relationship intimacy-loyalty* and *relationship passion*.

People usually tend to be in a relationship with partners that match their ideal [4,8]. When perception of the partner/relationship closely matches an individual's ideal standards, both partner and relationship are evaluated

more positively [3,5,9,20]. In these cases, the number of break-ups is lower [11]. Campbell *et al* showed that individuals accurately inferred on how closely they matched their partners' ideal standards [3].

Investigating the consistency between partner perception and ideal standards and the partner regulation attempts, Overall *et al* found that greater regulation attempts reduced the ideal-perception consistency, were associated with more negative self-evaluations, more self-regulation by the targeted partner and lower relationship satisfaction. Further investigating regulation attempts, tested the success of different communication strategies used to determine expected changes in partners [17,18]. The results of their studies showed that direct strategies (positive and negative) were perceived as unsuccessful but predicted increased change over the next 12 months while positive-indirect strategies did not predict change but were perceived as more successful.

Focusing on the outcomes of different perceived partner-ideal discrepancies, Lackenbauer *et al* showed that when individuals perceived their partner to be the source

of partner discrepancy they experienced emotions of dejection; also, when they perceived they were the source of partner discrepancy led them to experience agitation emotions [15]. A more recent research has shown that not all ideals equally predict satisfaction about relationship. Intrinsic ideal (warm, honest), compared to extrinsic ideals (attractiveness, resources), are more strongly associated with relationship satisfaction [20].

The aim of our study is to test, within the ideal standards model framework, a complex dyadic model assessing the relationship between perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, real-ideal discrepancies, coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal, and relationship satisfaction using the ideal standards model. Accordingly, we propose 5 major relations between variables, as specified in the next paragraphs and presented in Figure 1.

Given the importance romantic relationships play in an individual's life, it is not surprising that researchers have been long interested in what makes a good relationship [25]. Two major theories have dominated this field of research: similarity and complementarity. The studies interested in this area of investigation found more support for the similarity hypothesis [12,14]. Moreover, it seems that *perceived* similarity influences attraction and relationship satisfaction [16,22,23]. The *first step* in our model includes the relationship between perceived ideal similarity and relationship satisfaction of both partners.

The *second step* in our model assesses the relationship between perceived ideal similarity and communication about those ideals. Theory and research show that the decision to reveal personal information about oneself depends greatly on evaluation of possible costs and benefits for the one revealing the information and the target of the disclosure. Greene *et al* claim that the reasons for disclosing/hiding information are the ones concerning the self, the others, and the relationship. The reasons concerning the relationship include similarity or having something in common, and the desire to create/intensify intimacy. To this extent, there have been research sustaining this point of view [6,13].

The *third step* of our research evaluates the relationship between communication about ideals and real-ideal discrepancies. Given the dissatisfaction unfulfilled standards can cause (people use ideal standards as evaluation and/or changing the partner/relationship criteria or even as a criteria to end relationships), partners can

avoid talking about this topic and can maintain an idealized image of the partner/relationship thus being unable to discover any real-ideal discrepancies. As a reverse, those couples who communicate are more able to accurately realize if the real partner meets the ideal one (most likely accuracy leads to real-ideal discrepancies as it is very unlikely for a person to meet all ideal standards of the partner); if the matching between the real and the ideal partner/relationship is low, then this discrepancy will urge partners to use coping strategies to manage it. Thus, we incorporate our third step into our model: communicating about ideals can lead to real-ideal discrepancies.

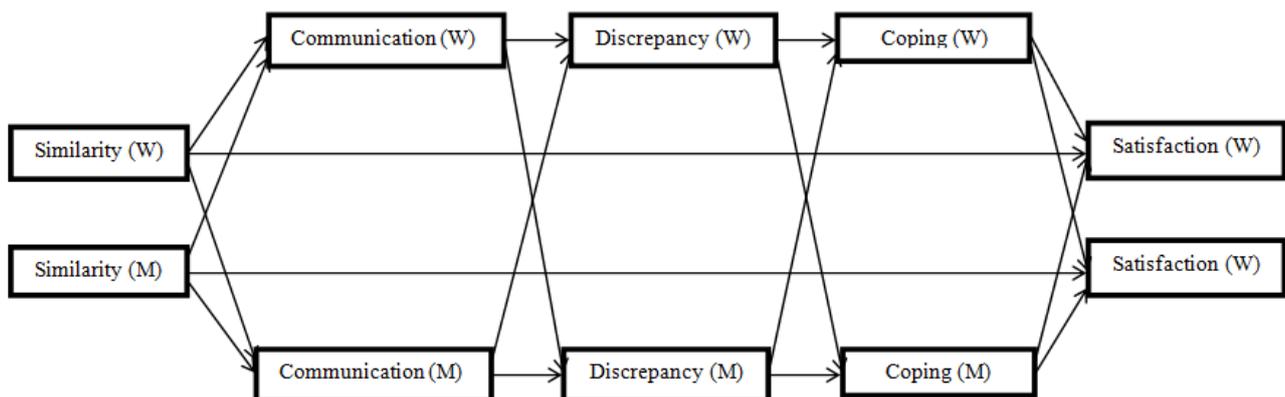
When people decide to start a new relationship, they already have certain standards about what makes a "good" relationship [24]. In his researches, Alexander claims that people, in situations where they are faced with unfulfilled relationship standards, use two strategies: either they leave the relationship or keep the relationship, but use a variety of coping strategies (like punishing, reframing, clarifying etc.). Considering this, we set up the *fourth step* of our analysis: real-ideal discrepancies determine people to use coping strategies [1].

As we stated earlier, faced with unfulfilled standards, people use different coping strategies to manage the situation. But to what extent are these strategies efficient? Studies interested in dyadic coping show its importance for relationship satisfaction [2,19]. Alexander developed an instrument to determine what coping strategies people usually use to face unmet relationship standards. A number of 10 strategies were identified: punishing, reframing, clarifying, self-disparaging, exiting, distancing, modeling, seeking social support, using humor, and escaping [1]. The author also showed that these coping strategies are associated with relationship satisfaction. As a result, the *fifth step* (and last) of our model posits the association between coping strategies and relationship satisfaction.

## 2. Material and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants are 153 couples involved in romantic relationship for at least 3 months. The average age of the sample is 29 years (SD=3.26 years). The average length of the relationships is 11 months.



**Figure 1.** Model explaining the relationship between perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, real-ideal discrepancies, coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal and relationship satisfaction. W-woman, M-man

## 2.2. Procedure

The instruments have been applied to an initial number of 435 couples. All couples were recruited from virtual environment (Facebook), workplace and personal connections. The participants were given the instruments which they then completed at home, individually (we pointed the importance of completing them individually). The next day, they returned the completed measures. In order to test our hypothesis – more communication about ideals can lead to higher real-ideal discrepancies - we selected the ones with real-ideal discrepancy scores above the mean. This step was necessary for us to test the hypothesis that more communication about ideals can lead to higher real-ideal discrepancies. Participants were informed that they would participate in a study concerned about peoples' ideals about partners/relationships and received envelopes with instruments they completed at home. The return rate was 83%.

## 2.3. Instruments

All participants reported their age, gender, status, and length of relationship, then they completed the following scales.

*Partner and relationship ideals.* The Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales [9] contain 69 items that form three partner ideal subscales (warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources) and two relationship ideals' subscales (intimacy-loyalty and passion). Considering the extended measures the participants would have to complete concerning ideal standards, we found it useful to use the short form of the scales (six items for each of the five subscales). We used the *Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales* to assess ideal similarity and communication of ideals, asking the participants to rate each item in different terms.

*Ideal similarity.* The Partner and Relationship Ideal Similarity Scales contained the same items as the *Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales* (30 items), but the participants were asked to rate each item in terms of each item in terms of "how similar do you think you and your partners' ideals are", using a 5-point Likert - type scale ranging from 1 (*very similar*) to 5 (*very dissimilar*).

*Communication of ideals.* The participants assessed the degree of communication concerning ideal standards they hold about partners/relationship using the *Partner and Relationship Ideal Communication Scales* (30 items). Their responses were rated on 5-point Likert-type scales (*1 = we don't discuss at all, 5 = we discuss very much*).

*Real-ideal discrepancies* were evaluated using absolute score differences between the ideal partner/relationship and perception concerning the actual partner/relationship. Using the *Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales* we assessed (a) how important is each ideal dimension describing the ideal partner/relationship and (b) to what degree the ideal dimensions describe the actual partner/relationship. Absolute score differences between the two scales were used to assess real-ideal discrepancies.

*Coping strategies.* Participants assessed the degree to which they use certain coping strategies when a certain aspect of the partner/relationship is less than ideal, using the instrument developed by Alexander [1].

*Relationship satisfaction.* The satisfaction subscale of the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (DAS) [21] was used to measure spouses' satisfaction with their marriage (10 items).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive results

Means, standard deviations, and Alpha's Cronbach are reported in Table 1. Internal consistency coefficients vary from acceptable (0,74) to very good (0,93).

### 3.2. Path analysis

The fit indices of the models are very good (Table 2): GFI > .90, AGFI > .90, CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08, NFI > .90, CFI>.90, with one exception: status-resources subscale. Accordingly, we eliminated this dimension from our analysis. Also, for each of our models, we eliminated those effects proven to be insignificant. The elimination process did not have negative effects on the fit indices (the indices reported in Table 2 are final, after comparing the models with and without constrains).

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and Alpha's Cronbach for perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, importance of ideals, perception of the current partner/relationship, coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal and relationship satisfaction**

	Mean		Alpha Cronbach
	Men	Women	
<b>Warmth-trustworthiness</b>			
Similarity	21.24 (3.35)	23.03 (4.05)	0.88
Communication	20.23 (5.30)	22.34 (4.95)	0.75
Importance	23.04 (3.76)	24.25 (3.32)	0.83
Perception	18.22 (2.27)	17.86 (2.30)	0.76
<b>Status-resources</b>			
Similarity	22.34 (3.27)	24.05 (3.95)	0.86
Communication	21.13 (4.36)	21.33 (4.23)	0.77
Importance	24.13 (3.16)	24.15 (3.20)	0.89
Perception	17.22 (2.23)	16.95 (2.32)	0.90
<b>Vitality-attractiveness</b>			
Similarity	20.34 (3.45)	21.56 (3.77)	0.74
Communication	22.23 (5.30)	24.35 (5.25)	0.75
Importance	23.17 (2.76)	22.25 (2.31)	0.92
Perception	19.22 (2.27)	18.75 (3.35)	0.86
<b>Intimacy-loyalty</b>			
Similarity	24.27 (3.27)	24.03 (3.35)	0.80
Communication	24.23 (4.35)	24.34 (4.32)	0.82
Importance	24.35 (3.26)	24.25 (3.17)	0.83
Perception	18.34 (2.27)	16.28 (2.33)	0.86
<b>Passion</b>			
Similarity	24.24 (2.36)	23.03 (2.25)	0.91
Communication	19.37 (2.30)	20.23 (2.95)	0.86
Importance	23.33 (2.26)	22.21 (2.32)	0.81
Perception	17.52 (2.35)	19.86 (2.30)	0.84
Coping strategies	217.25(7.32)	231.23 (8.79)	0.93
Relationship satisfaction	39.24 (4.45)	38.54 (4.33)	0.86

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

**Table 2. Values for main indicators for the dyadic model**

	$\chi^2$ (p)	RMSEA (PCLOSE)	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI
Warmth-trustworthiness	27.33 (0.24)	0.02 (0.81)	0.97	0.94	0.93	0.98
Vitality-attractiveness	16.14 (0.13)	0.04 (0.52)	0.98	0.93	0.95	0.98
Intimacy-loyalty	23.66 (0.07)	0.05 (0.46)	0.98	0.92	0.94	0.97
Passion	18.95 (0.21)	0.03 (0.70)	0.98	0.94	0.94	0.98

**Table 3. Direct Effects for the Dyadic Model**

		Actor effects		Partner effects	
		W	M	W -M	M -W
<b>Warmth-trustworthiness</b>					
	Sim-Com	0.30	0.26	-	-
	Com-Dis	0.43	0.30	0.16	0.12
	Dis-Cop	0.50	0.29	-	-
	Cop-Sat	0.23	0.19	-	0.17
	Sim-Sat	0.14	0.33	0.06	0.16
<b>Vitality-attractiveness</b>					
	Sim-Com	0.37	0.29	0.04	0.14
	Com-Dis	0.31	0.20	-	-
	Dis-Cop	0.50	0.29	-	-
	Cop-Sat	0.26	0.16	0.05	-
	Sim-Sat	0.12	0.34	0.04	0.21
<b>Intimacy-loyalty</b>					
	Sim-Com	0.83	0.76	0.17	0.13
	Com-Dis	0.88	0.71	0.24	0.08
	Dis-Cop	0.78	0.67	0.25	0.17
	Cop-Sat	0.93	1.00	0.20	0.12
	Sim-Sat	0.08	0.40	0.10	0.01
<b>Passion</b>					
	Sim-Com	0.41	0.58	0.15	-
	Com-Dis	0.42	0.46	0.25	0.18
	Dis-Cop	0.53	0.44	0.29	-
	Cop-Sat	0.46	0.56	0.55	0.13
	Sim-Sat	0.32	0.19	0.37	-

Note: W – Women, M – Men, Sim – Similarity, Com – Communication, Dis – Discrepancy, Cop – Coping, Sat – Satisfaction.

The results presented in Table 3 show that, for the warmth-trustworthiness ideals, the actor effects are significant for all paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals – real-ideal discrepancies – coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal – relationship satisfaction and perceived ideal similarity – relationship satisfaction. Partner effects are significant for the following paths: perceived ideal similarity – relationship satisfaction and communication – real-ideal discrepancies. For the coping strategies–relationship satisfaction path, only the partner effect from men to women is significant meaning that coping strategies adopted by women are influencing men’s perception of their relationship satisfaction.

For the vitality-attractiveness ideals, the actor effects are significant for all paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals – real-ideal discrepancies – coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal – relationship satisfaction. Partner effects are significant for the following paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals and perceived ideal similarity – satisfaction. For the coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal – relationship satisfaction path, only the partner effect from women to men is significant.

For the intimacy-loyalty ideals, the actor effects are significant for all paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals – real-ideal discrepancies – coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal – relationship satisfaction (without an significant effect for the perceived ideal similarity – relationship satisfaction path). Partner effects are significant for the following paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals and coping strategies – relationship satisfaction. For the communication – discrepancy path, only the partner effect from women to men is significant. There are not any significant partner effects for the perceived ideal similarity – relationship satisfaction path.

For the passion ideals, the actor effects are significant for all paths: perceived ideal similarity – communication about ideals – real-ideal discrepancies – coping strategies used when the partner/relationship is less than ideal – relationship satisfaction. Partner effects are significant for the following paths: communication about ideals – real-ideal discrepancies and coping strategies – relationship satisfaction. For the perceived ideal similarity – relationship satisfaction and coping strategies – relationship satisfaction discrepancy paths, only the partner effect from women to men is significant.

## 4. Discussion

Taking into account the role of perceived similarity in relationship outcomes and inspired by the ideal standards model [7,10], this study examined a complex dyadic model involving perceived ideal similarity, communication about ideals, real-ideal discrepancies, coping strategies, and relationship satisfaction. According to the ideal standards model, similarity to the ideal partner/relationship leads to positive relationship outcome [5].

For our proposed model, perceived ideal similarity was found to influence own and partner satisfaction for the warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and passion dimensions. The present study extends the ideal standards model by incorporating the relationship between perceived ideal similarity and relationship satisfaction.

Perceived ideal similarity influences own, but not partner communication about ideals for the warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and passion dimensions. In the case of the intimacy-loyalty dimension, perceived ideal similarity influences own and partner communication about ideals. The results of the present study are in line with others that state the importance of perceived similarity [16] and adds another dimension to the ideal standards model: the more partners feel they share similar ideals, the more they communicate about this topic. The reasons for disclosing personal information include "similarity or having something in common" [13]. Hence, it is highly conceivable that, in dyads where partners feel they are similar with respect to their ideals, they are more likely to disclose information about their belief of what their ideal partner/relationship is.

Communication about ideals was found to be related to real-ideal discrepancies (significant actor effects for the warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness and intimacy-loyalty dimensions and significant partner effects for the warmth-trustworthiness and passion dimensions), given the fact that it is highly unlikely to meet all of one's expectations. Moreover, individuals involved in romantic relationships often feel that their partners are not matching their standards [1]. The more partners talk, the more tendency to uncover real-ideal discrepancies is. In turn, discovering that the partner does not meet an individual standards, threatens the chance to have a good relationship [15].

Real-ideal discrepancies are related to regulation attempts from the partner and communication is often used as a means to elicit change in the partner [17,18]. Nevertheless, individuals are likely to find ways of coping with unfulfilled standards in romantic relationships [1]. In our model, higher real-ideal discrepancies led to increased use of coping strategies for all dimensions, while for intimacy-loyalty partners influence each other and in the case of passion, only women influence men.

The use of coping strategies when faced with unfulfilled standards in romantic relationships is linked to different outcomes [1]. Our study reveals the association between coping strategies and relationship satisfaction (actor effects) and the influence partners have on each other (in the case of intimacy-loyalty and passion, partners influence each other, while women influence men on warmth-trustworthiness and men influence women on vitality-attractiveness).

The present study deepens the knowledge about the way ideal standards influence relationship satisfaction by developing an extensive model of the relationship between perceived ideal similarity and relationship satisfaction of both partners for those couples perceiving high discrepancies between the actual partner and the ideal one. For each dimension, we state that in relationships where partners feel they have similar ideals they will be motivated to share them. In return, higher degrees of communication will lead to higher perceived real-ideal discrepancies. Higher perceived real-ideal discrepancies will determine partners to use different coping strategies to deal with the inconsistency. In the end, using coping strategies leads to higher relationship satisfaction [1].

As any other study, this one has its limits. Firstly, we did not take into consideration the valence of the communication (positive or negative), research suggesting this issue is an important one when we encounter real-ideal discrepancies and individuals are motivated to change their partners [18]. Also, we were not interested on the impact of each coping strategy on relationship satisfaction. Each strategy can be associated more or less with satisfaction with the relationship: some of them might be more useful than others and can have more positive long term consequences. Last, but not least, we based our research on cross-sectional data, inferential conclusions based on this study were not considered. Future research should take these issues into consideration.

## 5. Conclusions

Despite its limits, this study extends the ideal standards model by testing a complex model explaining the path from perceived ideal similarity to relationship satisfaction for those couples perceiving large discrepancies between the actual partner/relationship and the ideal one, showing that (a) perceived similarity of ideals influences communication about ideals, (b) communication about ideals influences real-ideal discrepancy scores, (c) real-ideal discrepancies motivates the use of coping strategies to manage the discrepancies between actual and ideal partner/relationship, and (d) the use of coping strategies leads to higher relationship satisfaction.

Finally, given the importance cognitive-behavioral therapy places on changing dysfunctional cognitions and communication training, professionals could benefit from the results of studies focused on people's beliefs about relationships and incorporate the role of communication. Some couples are more compatible than others. Evaluating partner and relationship ideals, we may understand the reason why some of them last and others do not.

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