

# Differing Perceptions in Dating Couples: Sex Roles vs. Alternative Explanations

Charles T. Hill

*University of Washington*

Letitia Anne Peplau

*University of California, Los Angeles*

Zick Rubin

*Brandeis University*

A longitudinal study of 231 dating couples investigated differences between partners' perceptions of their relationship. Sources of differing perceptions and the impact of perceptual differences on relationship continuation were explored. Although considerable perceptual disagreement was found, most of it did not appear to be linked to gender. Few systematic differences were found between men's and women's reports, and these could be interpreted in terms of self-partner attributional biases rather than sex differences. The extent of couple disagreement was not correlated with measures of sex role attitudes or background dissimilarity. But disagreement on subjective judgments of intimacy was greater among couples in which there was low self-disclosure. Disagreement on subjective intimacy judgments was also predictive of relationship termination two years later. Results underscore the importance of distinguishing between "directional" and "nondirectional" measures of couple disagreement. Findings also indicate that discrepancies in couple member's reports cannot be dismissed solely as measurement error, since they have substantive implications as well.

Bernard (1972) suggests that to understand marriage it is necessary to distinguish between "his" marriage and "hers." She calls attention to the fact that members of couples often give differing responses to questions about their relationship.

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For example, spouses have been found to disagree on how often they have intercourse (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948) and on the exercise of power in their relationship (e.g., Salifios-Rothschild, 1969). But while differences have been documented, little is known about the sources of such disagreement (cf. Booth & Welch, 1978) or about the impact of disagreement on couples' relationships.

Often discrepant reports by members of couples are viewed as a methodological problem, and dismissed as nothing more than measurement "error" (e.g., Douglas & Wind, 1978). To the extent that partners' reports reflect actual differences in perceptions, however, they raise important substantive issues as well. Is disagreement in heterosexual dyads related to gender, as Bernard suggests? Or does it reflect the effects of such other factors as attributional biases, low self-disclosure between partners, or background dissimilarity? What is the impact of disagreement on the course of couples' relationships? In this paper, we will address issues concerning the sources and the impact of couple disagreement. But first we need to clarify the kind of disagreement we are considering.

It is possible to identify at least two different kinds of couple agreement or disagreement. One kind involves similarity between partners' personal attitudes and values, such as the importance of having children or one's favorableness to the women's liberation movement. This kind of agreement is often referred to as "attitude similarity" (e.g., Griffit, 1974). The second major kind of agreement involves similarity in perceptions of the relationship, such as the frequency of intercourse or the exercise of power. We will refer to this as "perceptual agreement." Booth and Welch (1978) note that the same term "consensus" has often been applied to any kind of couple agreement, and suggest that failure to distinguish types of consensus has hampered previous research. In the present paper, therefore, we will focus on agreement on perceptions of the relationship. (Our findings on attitude similarity are reported in Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976).

### *Sources of Perceptual Disagreement*

At least four possible sources of perceptual disagreement can be identified: sex roles, self-partner attributional biases, low self-disclosure between partners, and background dissimilarity.

*Sex roles.* Bernard (1972) assumes that gender is a major source of discrepant perceptions in heterosexual couples. She suggests that men and women react differently to male-female relationships as a result of institutionalized sex roles. In her words, "The differences between the marriages of husbands and wives are structural realities, and it is these structural [i.e., role] differences that constitute the basis for the different psychological realities" (p. 10). This statement implies that discrepancies in couple members' perceptions ought to take the form of systematic sex differences in which men as a group perceive their relationships somewhat differently than do women as a group. For example, since traditional sex roles confer greater authority on men, women may learn to exert influence in subtle ways that permit men to think that they have more power than they really do (cf. Johnson & Goodchilds, 1976; Johnson, 1976). If this is true, we might expect the greatest disagreement in reports of power in couples with the most traditional sex role attitudes—for whom the maintenance of at least the illusion of male dominance is presumably most important.

It may be, however, that traditional sex role attitudes lead *both* men and women to overestimate the extent of male dominance. This would result in misperception by both men and women, but would not necessarily result in disagreement between them. Perhaps disagreement would then be most likely in couples in which the man and the woman differ in their sex-role attitudes (cf. Safilios-Rothchild, 1969). That is, if the man has more traditional attitudes than the woman, he may report greater male dominance than she. Generalizing from these examples, there appear to be at least two ways in which perceptual disagreement might be related to sex role attitudes: (a) greater disagreement in couples with the most traditional sex role attitudes or (b) greater disagreement in couples with the most discrepant sex role attitudes.

*Self-partner attributional biases.* Another possible source of disagreement is suggested by research on attribution theory. Jones and Nisbett (1971) suggested that there may be systematic differences between the explanations for behavior given by actors and observers, due to differences in the information that is available or salient to each (also see Jones, 1976). Kelley suggests that in dyads there may be similar systematic differences

between perceptions of one's own behavior and the behavior of one's partner (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; also see Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978). For example, individuals tend to overestimate their own contribution to their relationship while underestimating their partner's contribution (cf. Berk, Shih, and Berheide, Note 1). Such biases might be most apparent when people make explicit comparisons between the self and the partner, such as when estimating who has more power in the relationship or who is more involved.

Note that what may appear to be a sex difference in perceptions by members of heterosexual couples may in fact be a systematic difference between perceptions of the self and the partner. For example, if each man thinks he has more power than he really does, and each woman thinks she has more power than she really does, this self-bias on the part of both men and women will result in the men reporting greater male power than the women (and, conversely, the women reporting greater female power than the men). Since systematic differences between partners' reports can be interpreted either in terms of sex differences or in terms of self-partner biases, how do we know which is correct? If the differences are linked to sex roles, variations in disagreement from couple to couple ought to be related to sex role attitudes. For example, the tendency for men to report greater male power than the women should be greater in couples with more traditional sex role attitudes or in couples in which the man has more traditional sex role attitudes than the woman. If, on the other hand, systematic differences occur in couples regardless of their sex role attitudes, then a self-partner bias explanation seems more plausible.

*Self-disclosure.* The amount of disagreement between couple members' perceptions might also reflect the nature of interaction in the dyad. Those couples who have self-disclosed a great deal to each other might be expected to exhibit greater agreement than those who have disclosed little. With high self-disclosure couple members might develop shared definitions of their relationship; with low self-disclosure they might be less likely to discover and resolve their differing perceptions. (Or, conversely, couple members who disagree might be less willing to self-disclose, especially if that disclosure might lead to increased conflict.)

*Background dissimilarity.* It has commonly been proposed that lack of "consensus" results from differences in social background. Attempts to document this effect in married couples, however, have found relatively few effects of background differences on either attitude similarity or agreement on perceptions of the relationship (Booth and Welch, 1978). It may be, however, that the effects of background differences decrease as couple members develop a history of shared experiences. If such is the case, background differences might have greater effects among couples who are only dating as opposed to couples who have been married for some time.

### *Impact of disagreement*

If discrepancies in couple members' reports are due to measurement error, then they should have little relevance to the course of couples' relationships. But if they reflect underlying differences in couple members' perceptions, they may have implications for relationship development. On the one hand, disagreement might provide a clue that a relationship is already "in trouble," that there are problems of which the disagreement is symptomatic. On the other hand, discrepancies in perceptions may create problems, since one partner may be acting on the basis of assumptions which the partner does not share. In marriage, a relationship might persist in spite of such difficulties. But in dating, where it is less difficult to end a relationship, couples exhibiting a great deal of perceptual disagreement might be likely to break up.

Of course, disagreement on certain aspects of the relationship should be more critical than disagreement on other aspects. For example, disagreement on how long the partners have known each other might be unimportant, since it is likely to have little impact on their behavior toward one another. But disagreement about whether the partners are in love with each other may suggest an asymmetry of involvement that bodes ill for the relationship. To assess the importance of disagreement, it would be useful to see if relationship termination is predicted by disagreement on various questions about a couple's relationship.

A longitudinal study of dating couples provided an opportunity to explore sources of differing perceptions, since both members of each couple independently completed question-

naires. In addition, the impact of disagreement could be assessed since it was known whether relationships were still intact or had broken up two years after the initial questionnaire.

## METHOD

Data reported in this paper come from a two-year study of the development of dating relationships begun in the spring of 1972 (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau, 1976; Peplau, Rubin, and Hill, 1976 and 1977; Rubin and Mitchell, 1976). Participants were members of 231 college-age dating couples recruited by letters mailed to a random sample of 5000 sophomores and juniors, half males and half females, at four colleges in the Boston area, and by advertising on campus. The colleges, chosen with a view towards diversity, included a large private university, a small private university, a Catholic university, and a state college enrolling commuter students. (Details of recruitment are described more fully in Hill, Rubin, Peplau, and Willard, 1979.)

When the study began, the modal couple was a sophomore woman dating a junior man. About half the participants' fathers had graduated from college and about one-fourth of the fathers held graduate degrees. Forty-four percent of the respondents were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, and 25% were Jewish, reflecting the religious composition of the colleges in our sample. Virtually all participants (97%) were white. Twenty-five percent lived at home with their parents, another 35% lived in apartments or houses by themselves or with roommates, and 38% lived in college dormitories.

At the beginning of the study the couples had been dating for a median period of about eight months. In three-fourths of the couples, both persons were dating their partner exclusively, but only 10% were engaged. Four-fifths of the couples had had sexual intercourse with each other, but only one-fifth of all couples were living together "all or most of the time."

### *Data Collection*

At initial testing sessions, both members of each couple independently completed identical versions of a 38-page questionnaire concerning their backgrounds, attitudes, and dating relationship. Follow-up questionnaires were administered about six months, one year, and two years after the initial session. Four-fifths of the original participants returned the two-year mail questionnaire, which assessed whether or not the couples had remained together or had broken up. Individuals were paid \$1.50 each at the initial session and \$3 each at the one-year followup session.

## RESULTS

To explore disagreement we compared couple members' responses on a variety of questions about their relationship, such as when they met, how often they saw each other, the likelihood that they would eventually marry, who had more say, etc. (Table 1). We found evidence of considerable disagreement. On every question, at least some couples disagreed. The closest to perfect agreement was on the question of whether or not they had had sexual intercourse. In 230 couples there was agreement on this measure, but in one couple the man said yes while his partner said no. Fortunately the man added a note in the margin: they had attempted to have intercourse but he had not achieved orgasm. He reported this as intercourse, but she did not. Thus it is possible to have different interpretations even when the "facts" seem clear.

What were the sources of these disagreements, and were they linked to gender? To answer this question we need to note that disagreement on a given question can take either of two forms. One form is more likely to be linked to gender than the other. We will briefly distinguish these two forms before describing the results concerning sources and impacts of couple disagreement.

### *Forms of Disagreement*

The form of disagreement which is most likely to be linked to gender is "directional" disagreement. This occurs when the difference between couple members' responses is always in the same direction from couple to couple. That is, whenever two couple members disagree, the man always reports a higher value than the woman or vice versa. For example, when a couple disagrees, the woman always rates the probability of marrying the partner higher than the man. The second form of disagreement is "nondirectional." This occurs when the difference between couple members' responses varies in direction from couple to couple. For example, the woman rates the probability of marriage higher than the man in some couples, but this pattern is reversed in other couples.

This distinction has important implications for the choice of measure of disagreement. Some measures, like t-tests, are direc-

tional. A paired t-test comparing couple members' reports can be used to identify a systematic difference between men's and women's reports. For example, the women, on the average, might report higher marriage probability than the men. Note, however, that a nonsignificant t-test does not indicate that couple members agree. There may still be disagreement which varies in direction from couple to couple. Other measures of disagreement can be used to identify nondirectional disagreement. A common example is an intra-couple correlation, in which the man's response on a given question is correlated with the woman's response on the same question across couples. A low correlation can reflect a number of things, such as disagreement which varies in direction from couple to couple, disagreement in a single direction which varies in magnitude from couple to couple, low question reliability, or limitations on the maximum size of  $r$  imposed by the response distribution. A high correlation, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean that most couple members agree. For example, if in every couple the woman's estimate of marriage probability were ten percent higher than the man's estimate, the Pearson correlation between their responses would be perfect even though there was disagreement in every couple. That is because intra-couple Pearson correlations ignore systematic mean differences between men's and women's reports.

Thus neither t-tests nor intra-couple correlations by themselves are complete measures of disagreement in couples. But employed together it may be possible to sort out differences which are systematically linked to gender from those which are not.

### *Sources of Disagreement*

We used both t-tests (a directional measure) and intracouple Pearson correlations (a non-directional measure) to explore the nature of disagreement in our dating couples. Most of the evidence of disagreement was revealed by intra-couple correlations (Table 1). Very little disagreement was revealed by paired t-tests. In other words, most of the disagreement did not appear to be systematically linked to gender.

The only questions which had a statistically significant paired t-test were those which asked for an explicit comparison between the self and the partner—who was relatively more in-

Table 1. Evidence of Disagreement

| <u>Question asked</u>           | <u>Intra-couple<br/>Correlations</u> | <u>Paired<br/>t-tests (t)</u> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| When met                        | .93                                  | -0.05                         |
| When began dating               | .97                                  | -0.61                         |
| When first intercourse (if had) | .91                                  | 0.74                          |
| Frequency of intercourse (6)    | .81                                  | 1.75                          |
| How often see each other (5)    | .78                                  | -0.13                         |
| Extent living together (3)      | .77                                  | 1.20                          |
| Probability of marriage (10)    | .80                                  | -1.65                         |
| Closeness (9)                   | .55                                  | 0.05                          |
| Whether both in love (3)        | .60                                  | 1.69                          |
| Who is more involved (5)        | .56                                  | 7.55**                        |
| Who has more say (5)            | .40                                  | -3.34**                       |
| Who has revealed more (5)       | .30                                  | -2.13*                        |

Notes. Dates were asked as month and year; these were converted to number of months prior to the questionnaire. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of categories in the response scale. The intra-couple correlation is the correlation of the man's report by the woman's report across all 231 couples. The paired t-test reflects the man's report minus the woman's report averaged across all couples. Two-tailed significance levels for values of t: \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

volved, who had relatively more say (power), and who had revealed (self-disclosed) relatively more. (Responses to these questions were made on five-point scales ranging from 1 = *partner much more* to 5 = *I much more*. During the analysis the men's responses were reversed to 1 = *I much more* and 5 = *partner much more*, so that for both sexes 1 meant the man much more and 5 meant the woman much more; that way the same numerical score would be referring to the same person when partners' answers were compared.) Compared to women, the men reported somewhat greater female involvement, greater male power, and greater male self-disclosure. But this is precisely the type of question for which a self-partner bias

interpretation is most applicable. Instead of thinking of these systematic discrepancies in reports as sex differences we can think of them as self-partner differences: both men and women are attributing somewhat greater involvement to the partner, greater power to the self, and greater disclosure to the self, than indicated by their partner's report. Which of these two interpretations is correct? We explored this by seeing if the amount of disagreement on these questions varied as a function of sex role attitudes.

*Sex role attitudes.* We measured sex role attitudes with a 10-item scale which asked couple members to agree or disagree with statements such as the following: "In marriage, the husband should take the lead in decision-making," "Women could run most businesses as well as men could." We used three measures of sex role attitudes: the man's scale score, the woman's scale score, and the signed difference between the man's and the woman's scale score. We used both a directional measure of disagreement (a signed difference score) and a non-directional measure of disagreement (an absolute difference score) for couple members' reports of each of the following: who was more involved, who had more say, who had revealed more. We examined the product-moment correlations between each of these measures of sex-role attitudes and each of these measures of disagreement. None of the correlations were statistically significant. (Similar analyses were also performed for the other questions listed in Table 1. While a few scattered correlations were significantly different from zero, all were small and no pattern emerged.)

These results suggest that perceptual *disagreement* in these heterosexual dating couples is not primarily linked to sex roles. However, we cannot rule out effects in which sex roles affected *both* men's and women's perceptions in the *same* way (cf. Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkranz, 1972). We found that both men and woman were less likely to report male dominance in their relationship if their sex role attitudes were less traditional (Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976). It is unclear, however, to what extent a less traditional sex role orientation led some men and women in our sample to *behave* in less traditional ways and to what extent it led them merely to *perceive* their behavior as being less traditional than it was in fact.

*Self-partner attributional biases.* If the statistically significant t-tests reflect attributional biases, they might be interpreted as follows: The bias to report one's partner as more involved in the relationship than oneself may reflect a tendency to protect one's self-esteem. Miller and Ross (1975) suggest that such a bias may be most likely when one is ego-involved (also see Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1978); such would appear to be the case in regard to involvement and power in dating relationships. Among those of our couples who broke up, there appeared to be a self-bias in reports of who wanted to break up—in which respondents claimed more interest in breaking up than indicated by their partner's reports (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Support for a self-bias instead of a sex difference interpretation of these breakup reports comes from a consideration of the reasons given for the breakup: both men and women cited "my" desire for independence as more important than "partner's" desire. Just as saying one wanted to break up may help one to cope with a breakup, saying one is less involved may help protect one from the negative consequences of a possible breakup.

A similar self-protective or a self-enhancement argument might be applied to the reports of who has more say: each person claims more power for himself or herself than indicated by the partner's report. On the other hand, the decisions that are made by the self may be more salient to the self than the decisions that are made by the partner (cf. Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The interpretation of this finding is further complicated by the fact that studies of power in married couples sometimes find a bias toward seeing the self as having more power and sometimes a bias toward seeing the partner as having more power (Douglas & Wind, 1978).

The difference in reports of who has revealed more might be interpreted as a tendency to underestimate the completeness of the partner's self-disclosures. Support for this interpretation comes from a comparison of respondents' separate reports of disclosures they have given to their partner and disclosures they have received from their partner. Using 17-item scales of disclosure given and of disclosure received, we find that both men and women report higher disclosure given than disclosure received (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980). This underestimation of the partner's disclosure might result from a lack of information about what the partner chose or chose not to disclose. A person may know how complete his or her own

disclosures have been but cannot be sure how complete the partner's disclosures have been. This line of reasoning is consistent with an attributional bias perspective (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Information about one's own behavior may be more available or more salient than information about the partner's behavior. Hence it appears fruitful to view systematic differences between couple members' reports as self-partner differences, even though the interpretation of various self-other differences in terms of "egotism" vs. salience remains controversial (cf. Miller & Ross, 1975; Snyder et al., 1978).

While attributional biases may be accounting for the few directional differences identified by the t-tests, what about the remaining nondirectional disagreement revealed by the intra-couple correlations? Two possible sources that we investigated were low self-disclosure and background dissimilarity.

*Self-disclosure.* We predicted a link between couple disagreement and the extent of self-disclosure between couple members. On the one hand, partners who have disclosed a great deal might develop shared definitions of their relationship and resolve their differing perceptions. On the other hand, if partners suspect that discussing disagreement might lead to conflict instead of resolution, disagreeing partners may be less willing to self-disclose. As indicated above, we measured self-disclosure using a 17-item scale which asked each partner to indicate the extent of his or her disclosure to the partner on various topic areas (Rubin, et. al., 1980). Using non-directional measures of disagreement (absolute difference scores), we found a fairly consistent pattern of correlations between self-disclosure and disagreement on various subjective intimacy questions (Table 2). Couples in which there was low disclosure were more likely to disagree on the likelihood of eventually marrying each other, on how close their relationship was, whether or not both were in love, and who was more involved in the relationship.

Notably absent among the significant correlations, however, was the correlation for who has more say (power). Apparently, increasing self-disclosure is associated with agreement on subjective definitions of intimacy, but does not facilitate agreement on power. The correlations between disclosure and agreement were also nonsignificant for measures such as when they met and how often they saw each other. Perhaps for these latter

Table 2. Correlates of Disagreement

| <u>Question asked</u>           | <u>Woman's<br/>Disclosure</u> | <u>Man's<br/>Disclosure</u> | <u>Together<br/>vs. Breakup</u> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| When met                        | .09                           | .07                         | .09                             |
| When began dating               | .01                           | -.02                        | -.02                            |
| When first intercourse (if had) | .09                           | .07                         | .04                             |
| Frequency of intercourse        | -.14*                         | -.06                        | -.08                            |
| How often see each other        | .02                           | -.08                        | .00                             |
| Extent living together          | -.02                          | .03                         | -.04                            |
| Probability of marriage         | -.17**                        | -.07                        | -.12*                           |
| Closeness                       | -.22**                        | -.21**                      | -.19**                          |
| Whether both in love            | -.17**                        | -.21**                      | -.21**                          |
| Who is more involved            | -.16**                        | -.12*                       | -.16**                          |
| Who has more say                | -.05                          | .02                         | -.07                            |
| Who has revealed more           | -.21**                        | -.11                        | .03                             |

Notes. Disagreement was measured by taking the absolute difference between the man's and the woman's report. A negative correlation indicates that greater disagreement is associated with lesser disclosure or with breaking up. N = 231 couples for disclosure correlations, N = 220 couples for together vs. breakup correlations.

One-tailed probability values for r: \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01

measures there is less need to self-disclose to come to agreement; the behavioral criteria are relatively clear and agreement is generally high (Table 1).

It might be argued that self-disclosure mediates between sex roles and perceptual disagreement: traditional couples are less likely to self-disclose, and low disclosure in turn is linked to greater disagreement on subjective intimacy judgments. While we found evidence for a link between sex role attitudes and self-disclosure (Rubin et al., 1980), we found no relationship between sex role attitudes and perceptual disagreement (reported above).

*Background dissimilarity.* It has often been suggested that couples with dissimilar backgrounds might exhibit more disa-

greement than couples with similar backgrounds. The empirical support for this among married couples, however, has been weak (Booth & Welch, 1978). We thought that perhaps there would be stronger effects of differing backgrounds for dating couples since they may have had less time than married couples to develop a history of shared experiences. To investigate this possibility we compared couples with similar or different father's educational level in terms of college graduate vs. non-college-graduate, and couples with same vs. different religious background in terms of Protestant/Catholic/Jewish. Neither background similarity measure was significantly correlated with directional (signed difference score) or nondirectional (absolute difference score) disagreement on any measure listed in Table 1, with one exception. Couple members with differing father's education were *more* likely to agree on the probability of eventually marrying each other ( $p < .05$ ). It appears that background differences are as unimportant in producing perceptual disagreement in dating couples as they are in married couples; current interaction patterns seem more important. It may be, however, that the samples used in this and other studies have been too homogeneous for large effects to appear.

### *Impact of Disagreement*

Does it matter if members of couples disagree on various aspects of their relationship? Is disagreement on some aspects more important than on others? We explored this by seeing whether measures of couple disagreement at the beginning of the study would predict whether couples were still together or had broken up two years later. At the time of the two-year followup 51% of the 231 couples were still together, 45% had broken up, and 4% had an unknown status (see Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976, for additional information concerning these break-ups).

We predicted that higher probability of breaking up would be associated with greater disagreement on various relationship measures, especially subjective intimacy measures such as whether or not both are in love. Disagreement on subjective intimacy measures might reflect an asymmetry of involvement in the relationship that bodes ill for the continuance of the relationship. For example, if the man says they are both in love, but the woman says they are not, that suggests that she is less in

love than he. Using absolute differences scores as measures of disagreement, we found that breaking up was indeed correlated with greater disagreement on various subjective intimacy measures (Table 2), such as marriage probability, closeness, whether both are in love, and relative involvement.

Note, however, that disagreement on power was unrelated to breaking up, as was disagreement on various questions that are less subjective. Overall, the pattern of significant and non-significant correlations was similar to that for self-disclosure, as is apparent in Table 2. Both low self-disclosure and breaking up were correlated with various subjective intimacy measures, but not with power or reports of other behaviors.

Perhaps we can hypothesize a model in which low self-disclosure leads to lack of mutual understanding which facilitates breaking up. We explored this possibility using partial correlations. When we controlled for disagreement on the subjective intimacy questions, the correlation between breaking up and self-disclosure decreased. But when we controlled for self-disclosure, the relationship between breaking up and disagreement on these measures remained statistically significant. This suggests that the effects of disclosure on staying together or breaking up are mediated by disagreement, which is consistent with our model. On the other hand, the data are also consistent with the reverse causal order: low self-disclosure results from disagreement which reflects a lack of compatibility in the relationship which is eventually manifested in breaking up.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our investigation of differing reports by members of dating couples indicates the need for more caution in interpreting discrepant perceptions in terms of sex roles, and points to alternative explanations.

Although there was evidence of considerable disagreement between partners, very little of this disagreement was in the form of systematic differences between men's and women's reports. The few systematic differences that were found between couple members' reports all involved explicit comparisons between the self and the partner, and seemed more readily interpretable in terms of self-partner attributional biases rather than in terms of sex roles; measures of sex role attitudes were

not related to discrepancies in these reports. This implies that the kinds of disagreement found in heterosexual couples are also likely to be found in other types of relationships, such as same-sex relationships for which the implications of sex roles may be different. These findings also underscore the importance of using both directional (e.g., paired *t*-tests) and non-directional (e.g., intra-couple correlations) measures in exploring couple disagreement.

As in marital relationships, background differences were not found to be related to differing perceptions in these dating couples. But the extent of self-disclosure between couple members was related to disagreement on subjective judgments of intimacy. Disagreement on these same judgments was also predictive of relationship termination two years later. One interpretation is that high self-disclosure between couple members facilitates perceptual agreement which facilitates the continuance of the relationship. An alternative interpretation, however, is that low self-disclosure results from disagreement which reflects a lack of compatibility which also bodes ill for relationship continuation.

Whatever the nature of the causal relationship among self-disclosure, couple disagreement, and relationship continuance, it is clear that discrepancies in couple members' reports cannot be solely attributed to measurement error (cf. Douglas & Wind, 1978). While some of the disagreement may indeed be due to "question ambiguity," a great deal of that ambiguity is inherent in couples' relationships themselves. Our investigation indicates the substantive importance of further research into the sources and impacts of discrepancies in couple members' perceptions.

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