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# Do You Get Where I'm Coming From?: Perceived Understanding Buffers Against the Negative Impact of Conflict on Relationship Satisfaction

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Conflict can have damaging effects on relationship health. But is all conflict detrimental? Across 7 studies, we tested the overarching hypothesis that conflict in close relationships is only detrimental when people do not feel their thoughts, feelings, and point of view are understood by their relationship partners. Supporting this, conflict was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction among participants who perceived their romantic partner as less understanding, but not among those who felt more understood by their partners. This was true cross-sectionally (Study 1), experimentally (Studies 2, 3, 6a, and 6b), in daily life (Study 4), and for both members of couples pre- to postconflict conversation in the laboratory (Study 5). The buffering effects of feeling understood could not be explained by people who felt more understood being more understanding themselves, having more general positive perceptions of their partners, fighting about less important or different types of issues, engaging in more pleasant conflict conversations, or being more satisfied with their relationships before the conflict. Perceived understanding was positively associated with conflict resolution, but this did not explain the benefits of feeling understood. Evidence from Studies 6a and 6b suggests that feeling understood during conflict may buffer against reduced relationship satisfaction in part because it strengthens the relationship and signals that one's partner is invested. Overall, these studies suggest that perceived understanding may be a critical buffer against the potentially detrimental effects of relationship conflict.

*Keywords:* close relationships, interpersonal conflict, perceived understanding, relationship satisfaction, perceived responsiveness

Fights over the division of household chores, disagreements about money, clashes in religious or political beliefs—conflict is an inevitable part of romantic relationships. As couples navigate life together, differences in opinion and perspective arise on issues big and small. When these differences lead to conflict, relationship health may suffer (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). However, is all conflict detrimental? The current research tested the overarching hypothesis that perceived understanding—that is, feeling that a partner is able to take one's perspective and “gets” one's thoughts, feelings, and point of view—buffers people against the negative impact of conflict on their relationship satisfaction.

## Conflict and Relationship Quality

Wide-ranging research on close relationships indicates that conflict can be associated with decreased relationship satisfaction (for

reviews, see Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Fincham & Beach, 1999), often predicting declines in satisfaction over time (e.g., Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Conflict in couples has also been linked to poorer health outcomes (e.g., Burman & Margolin, 1992; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005), and identified as an antecedent of domestic violence, ineffective parenting, and relationship dissolution (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004; for a review, see Booth, Crouter, & Clements, 2001). Children have also been shown to be negatively impacted by marital conflict (e.g., Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Jekielek, 1998). Findings such as these would seem to suggest that conflict necessarily inflicts damage on relationships and the people involved in them. Other findings, however, suggest that what matters is not whether conflicts occur, but how they are managed (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009).

From a conflict management perspective, conflicts are indeed thought of as damaging and destructive, but only when they are characterized by negative behaviors such as aggression, hostility, or withdrawal (e.g., Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999; for a review, see Heyman, 2001). When they involve positive behaviors such as affection, affiliative humor, or effective problem-solving, conflicts can instead be constructive (e.g., Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008; Gill et al., 1999; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003). In line with this perspective, research shows that teaching premarital couples how to manage conflict constructively can minimize marital distress in the first few years of marriage (Markman et al., 1993).

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Still other lines of inquiry suggest that the association between conflict and relationship satisfaction may be even more nuanced. For example, some research shows that angry exchanges between spouses, while related to current unhappiness and negative interactions, are associated with increases in satisfaction over the course of the marriage (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Other researchers have found that direct, negative problem-solving strategies are associated with desired behavior changes in intimate partners and thus more stable satisfaction over time, especially for couples with severe problems (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009).

Overall, then, there is no shortage of viewpoints on the association between conflict and relationship health. However, across the conflict literature, one thing is clear: conflict plays an important role in the health and longevity of close relationships. In the present investigation, we sought to expand this literature by shining a light on perceived understanding during conflict and its impact on relationship satisfaction.

### Perceived Understanding During Conflict: Does My Partner Get Where I Am Coming From?

Misunderstanding between partners often lies at the heart of conflicts; thus, partners who feel more understood by each other may be less likely to find themselves in the midst of a conflict (Cahn, 1990; Gordon, Tuskeviciute, & Chen, 2013). In the present research, we focused on the possibility that perceived understanding may also play a crucial role during the conflict itself. Conflict occurs when partners' views on an issue or topic clash. As such, conflict can create a situation in which partners do not feel understood by each other, potentially putting relationship quality at risk (e.g., Long, 1990; Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). That is, when partners find themselves at odds with each other, feeling that one's partner gets one's thoughts and feelings could help minimize the damage caused by the conflict. Thus, our central hypothesis was that conflict between romantic partners is detrimental to relationship quality only when people do not feel understood by their partners. When instead people perceive that a romantic partner *does* understand their thoughts, feelings, and point of view, such perceived understanding should buffer against the negative relational consequences of conflict.

Support for our central hypothesis can be drawn from various literatures. First, research suggests that, in general, feeling understood by a romantic partner tends to have relational benefits (e.g., Cahn, 1990; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Long, 1990; Long & Andrews, 1990; Maisel, & Gable, 2009; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009; Reis & Gable, 2015; Swann et al., 1994). Whether one feels understood in a global sense (e.g., Cahn, 1990; Debrot, Cook, Perez, & Horn, 2012; Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009; Swann et al., 1994), or within a specific situation, such as when receiving support or sharing good news with one's partner (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Maisel, & Gable, 2009), people tend to experience greater relationship quality when they perceive that their partner understands them.

Theorizing and research on perceived responsiveness, which is considered to be a bedrock of intimacy in the close relationships

literature, also support our hypothesis (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). When partners disclose their thoughts and feelings and perceive their partners as responsive to their disclosures in their daily lives, their relationships are more intimate (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2005). Perceived understanding is related to perceived responsiveness, but they are not one and the same. More specifically, perceiving a romantic partner as able to "get" one's thoughts, feelings, and point of view can be thought of as a key component of perceived partner responsiveness. Along these lines, the other two facets of perceived partner responsiveness, perceived validation and caring, are thought to be predicated upon feeling understood (Reis, 2014), underscoring the potential relational benefits conferred by, in particular, perceived understanding.

Focusing more specifically on a link between perceived understanding and conflict, we suggest that perceiving a partner as understanding may be most pressing and consequential precisely in conflict situations—when partners' thoughts, feelings, and point of view diverge (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). More pointedly, conflict may be especially diagnostic of the status of one's relationship, as it is a context that requires each member of the couple to choose between prioritizing oneself versus prioritizing one's partner and relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Furthermore, it is in such diagnostic situations, wherein partners are likely to *not* feel understood, that perceived understanding is likely to transform the situation and benefit the relationship.

In support of the importance of understanding during conflict, research on the relational consequences of *being* understanding of one's partner in conflict situations (e.g., engaging in understanding behaviors, being empathically accurate; e.g., Cohen, Schulz, Weiss, & Waldinger, 2012; Dimidjian, Martell, & Christensen, 2002; Gottman, 1994; Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001) suggests the potential benefits of understanding during conflict. Although some findings from this literature suggest that being understanding has little impact (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Melby, Ge, Conger, & Warner, 1995), or even a negative impact under certain circumstances (Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003), the majority suggests that being understanding of one's partner during conflict is beneficial. For example, researchers have treated behaviors signaling understanding and validation as constructive behaviors in observational coding systems quantifying conflict behaviors (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Hahlweg et al., 1984; Heyman, Weiss, & Eddy, 1995), and find that members of satisfied couples exhibit more of these behaviors during conflict than members of distressed couples (e.g., Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Couple therapies, such as integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT; Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Eldridge, 2000), often focus on promoting understanding between partners during conflict (e.g., Dimidjian et al., 2002; Markman et al., 2001). In addition, greater empathic accuracy during marital conflict has been shown to promote accommodative behavior and relationship well-being in the early years of marriage (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). As a final example, research has shown that married couples are buffered against declines in marital quality when they are instructed to focus on a conflict from a third-person's point of view, which can aid in understanding a partner's perspective (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013).

The focus of the literature reviewed thus far has been on the impact of perceived understanding in general, or of being understood during conflict. But what about the benefits of *perceived* understanding during conflict—that is, the perception that a partner understands one's thoughts, feelings, and point of view in a conflict situation? Observational measures are the gold standard for assessing conflict behaviors, as self-report measures of such behavior are often thought to be unreliable (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Weiss & Heyman, 1990). However, when considering the effect of conflict behaviors on relationship quality, it is critical to recognize that a partner's behaviors are filtered through one's perceptions, which are colored not only by the partner's actual behavior, but also by one's preexisting beliefs and expectations, motivational biases, contextual factors, prior experiences, and so forth (Bruner, 1957; Darley & Gross, 1983; Higgins, 1996; Snyder & Swann, 1978). For example, research has shown that people's beliefs about their own responsiveness heavily influence their perceptions of their partners' responsiveness (Debot et al., 2012; Lemay & Clark, 2008), and people tend to project their existing feelings about their relationships onto their interpretations of their partners' affect and behavior (e.g., Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995). Findings like these highlight the need to examine the unique effect of *perceived* understanding during conflict on relationship satisfaction.

Researchers have in fact found that perceived understanding is a unique, and at times stronger, predictor of relationship quality than is the partner's actual knowledge (e.g., Pollmann & Finke-nauer, 2009). In the context of conflict, one study found that simply *expecting* a romantic partner to be understanding during conflict promoted positive behaviors during conflict interactions for both members of the couple (Sanford, 2006). More importantly, expectations of understanding from a partner predicted positive behaviors above and beyond the partner's actual level of understanding. Another study found that people who were more satisfied with their relationships perceived their partners as trying harder to be empathic during high-affect moments of a problem-solving conversation, particularly for positive emotions, as compared with people who were less satisfied with their relationships (Cohen et al., 2012). Once more, the link between relationship satisfaction and *perceived* empathic effort held even when controlling for people's own and their partners' *actual* level of understanding (i.e., empathic accuracy). These studies tapped expectations and perceptions of empathic effort, rather than perceived understanding, but their findings cohere well with our overarching hypothesis that perceiving a partner as understanding during conflict promotes relationship health by buffering against decreased relationship satisfaction after conflict.

### The Present Research

Using cross-sectional, experimental, diary, and dyadic methods, we conducted seven studies to test the hypothesis that conflict between romantic partners only leads to reduced relationship satisfaction if people do not feel understood by their partners. Across studies we operationalized perceived understanding in terms of participants' perceptions that their romantic partners are able to accurately understand their thoughts, feelings, and point of view. We focused on relationship satisfaction as our outcome variable

because it is a multifaceted construct that captures people's global feelings about their relationship (Neff & Karney, 2005).

As a first step, Study 1 explored whether people in more conflictual relationships are less satisfied with their relationships than participants in less conflictual relationships only if they tend to feel less understood by their romantic partners. Studies 2 and 3 tested the causal link between perceived understanding during conflict and relationship satisfaction. In Study 2, we compared recalled conflicts in which participants did or did not feel understood to a recalled neutral relationship event. In Study 3, we directly manipulated perceived understanding by having all participants first identify the top source of conflict in their relationships and then randomly assigning them to imagine fighting with their partner about that source of conflict and feeling either understood or not understood.

Studies 4 and 5 tested our hypothesis in the context of actual conflicts. Study 4 was a 2-week daily experience study in which we examined whether participants felt less satisfied on days when they experienced conflict relative to days without conflict, and whether this effect was moderated by perceived understanding that day. In Study 5, couples conversed about a source of conflict in their relationship. We examined whether feeling understood by a partner during the conflict conversation buffered against declines in relationship satisfaction from pre- to postconflict. Because both members of the couple took part in this study, we were also able to test whether perceived understanding buffered against reduced relationship satisfaction postconflict not only for the participants who felt more understood but also for their partners.

Given abundant research highlighting the potential benefits of perceived understanding, it stands to reason that the beneficial buffering effect of perceived understanding during conflict on relationship satisfaction may be relatively direct. Consistent with this is research showing that perceived understanding activates brain regions associated with reward (Morelli, Torre, & Eisenberger, 2014). However, perceived understanding during conflict likely has indirect influences on relationship satisfaction as well. Thus, in Study 6, we explored mechanisms that may help explain the buffering role of perceived understanding during conflict. We used a bottom-up approach, gathering potential reasons from open-ended responses in one sample (Study 6a) and then testing whether the most commonly cited reasons obtained from this sample emerged as significant mechanisms in a second sample (Study 6b).

Across studies, we considered alternative accounts for our findings, including self-reported understanding (Studies 1–5), general positive perceptions of one's partner (Study 1), size and type of problem causing conflict (Studies 2, 3, and 6), affective tone of the conflict conversation (Study 5), and conflict resolution (Studies 2, 3, 5, and 6). Furthermore, by controlling for preconflict satisfaction in Studies 4 and 5, we were able to rule out the possibility that differences in satisfaction were due to people who felt more understood already being more satisfied with their relationship.

Finally, given the novelty of our hypothesis, we took a basic approach when determining sample sizes for our studies. For our experiments, we relied on recent recommendations to obtain at least 20 participants per cell (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011), plus an additional 15% (the approximate percentage of participants in published articles who need to be excluded for poor attention; Chandler, Paolacci, & Mueller, 2014). Because we wanted to ensure ample power to detect a potentially small effect,

and other rules of thumb suggest obtaining at least 30 per cell for 80% power with a medium effect size (VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007), we aimed to have closer to 50 participants per cell after exclusions. For our other studies, taking into consideration the cost of our more complex designs (daily experience study, laboratory study with couples), we followed rules of thumb recommending a minimum of 50 participants for regression analyses and at least 10 participants per predictor but closer to 30 for a small effect size (for a review, see VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007). Overall, by following these guidelines to determine our sample sizes, paired with the inclusion of seven studies using diverse methods, we felt fairly confident that, as a package, our studies were adequately powered.

### Study 1

As a first step, we surveyed a cross-sectional sample of individuals in romantic relationships about conflict in their relationships, feelings of being understood by their romantic partners, and general relationship satisfaction. We predicted that degree of conflict would be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction among participants who tended to feel less understood by their partners, but not among those who tended to feel more understood. Study 1 also tested two plausible alternative accounts: First, people who feel understood by their romantic partners also tend to report better perspective-taking skills themselves (Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009), and being understanding has been linked to better outcomes during conflict (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Thus, it may be that people are buffered against the negative relational effects of conflict not because they perceive their partners as understanding, but because they themselves are being understanding (i.e., self-reported understanding; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Second, research shows that perceiving positive regard from a romantic partner buffers against feelings of rejection after conflict (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). This raises the possibility that perceived understanding may simply reflect general positive perceptions about one's partner and any positive view of one's partner could play the same role as perceived understanding. To rule out these possibilities, we tested self-reported understanding and perceptions of one's partner as supportive, trustworthy, and caring as alternative explanations.

### Method

**Participants and procedure.** One hundred forty-three undergraduates (110 women, 26 men) who were in romantic relationships for at least 6 months participated for course credit. Seven were removed from analyses for failing to comply with at least two (out of 3) attention checks. Forty-eight percent of the sample was Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 32% European/European American, 8% Hispanic, 1% African/African American, and 10% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 21 years old (range = 18–44), and had been in their relationship for a little over 2 years (range = 6 months to over 13 years). Six percent were engaged, 22% cohabiting, 4% married, and 39% were in long-distance relationships. Interested participants were di-

rected to a secure website where they completed a series of measures online.

#### Measures.

**Conflict.** We measured conflict with six face-valid items: "My partner and I have a lot of disagreements," "I feel like all my partner and I do is fight," "There is a lot of conflict in my relationship," "I am often irritated by my partner," "My partner and I are always in agreement on major issues" (reverse scored), and "It is rare that my partner and I get in a big argument" (reverse scored). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The items exhibited strong reliability:  $\alpha = .83$  with  $M = 2.76$  ( $SD = 1.19$ , range = 1–6.33).

**Perceived and self-reported understanding.** We measured perceived understanding with 10 items from the Other Dyadic Perspective Taking Scale (Long, 1990) that assess the extent to which people feel that their partners understand their thoughts, feelings, and point of view. These were items such as "My partner not only listens to what I am saying but really understands and seems to know where I am coming from," "My partner nearly always knows exactly what I mean," and "My partner does not sense or realize what I am feeling" (reverse scored). We measured self-reported understanding with the 8 items from the Self Dyadic Perspective Taking Scale (Long, 1990) that assess the extent to which people feel they are able to understand their partners thoughts, feelings, and point of view. This 8-item scale includes statements such as "I am able to sense or realize what my partner is feeling," "I am good at understanding my partner's problems," and "I very often seem to know how my partner feels."

For both scales, participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). For perceived understanding:  $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ , range = 1.6–7, and  $\alpha = .91$ . For self-reported understanding:  $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = .87$ , range = 2.4–7, and  $\alpha = .88$ .

**Relationship satisfaction.** We measured relationship satisfaction with the four-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The scale is derived from an Item Response Theory analysis of common relationship quality measures and includes items such as "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" All items were measured on 6-point Likert scales;  $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = .91$ , range = 2–7, and  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Positive partner perceptions.** We measured general positive partner perceptions with three items from the Triangular Love Scale's Intimacy subscale (Sternberg, 1997): "I am able to count on my partner in times of need," "I feel that I can really trust my partner," and "I receive considerable emotional support from my partner." Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *completely agree*, 7 = *completely disagree*);  $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = .90$ , range = 2.7–7, and  $\alpha = .81$ .

### Results and Discussion

The results from the main analyses are summarized in Table 1. In line with prior research, participants who experienced more conflict in their relationships were, on average, significantly less satisfied with their relationships relative to participants who experienced less conflict (Model 1). However, as predicted, this effect was moderated by perceived understanding (Model 2). As shown

Table 1  
Summary of Results for Study 1

|                                    | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> | 95% CI       |
|------------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Model 1                            |          |          |              |
| Conflict                           | -.44***  | 8.04     | [-.55, -.33] |
| Model 2:                           |          |          |              |
| Conflict                           | -.20**   | 3.35     | [-.32, -.08] |
| Perceived understanding            | .36**    | 5.82     | [.24, .48]   |
| Conflict × Perceived understanding | .11**    | 2.81     | [.03, .19]   |
| Model 3                            |          |          |              |
| Conflict                           | -.27***  | 4.85     | [-.38, -.16] |
| Self-reported understanding        | .39***   | 5.11     | [.24, .54]   |
| Conflict × Self understanding      | .13*     | 2.42     | [.02, .23]   |
| Model 4                            |          |          |              |
| Conflict                           | -.26***  | 5.40     | [-.36, -.17] |
| Positive partner perceptions       | .55***   | 7.84     | [.41, .69]   |
| Conflict × Positive perceptions    | .02      | .33      | [-.08, .11]  |
| Model 5                            |          |          |              |
| Conflict                           | -.18***  | 3.08     | [-.42, -.14] |
| Perceived understanding            | .26***   | 3.51     | [.11, .41]   |
| Conflict × Perceived understanding | .07      | 1.20     | [-.05, .19]  |
| Self-reported understanding        | .20*     | 2.31     | [.03, .38]   |
| Conflict × Self understanding      | .06      | .70      | [-.10, .22]  |

Note. Estimates are unstandardized. Degrees of freedom range from 129 to 133. CI = confidence interval.

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

in Figure 1, degree of conflict in the relationship was negatively associated with satisfaction among participants who felt less understood by their partners ( $-1 SD$ ),  $b = -.32$ ,  $t(131) = 4.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% confidence interval (CI)  $[-.46, -.19]$ . Among participants who felt more understood, degree of conflict was not associated with relationship satisfaction ( $1 SD$ ),  $b = -.07$ ,  $t < 1$ ; 95% CI  $[-.23, .08]$ .<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, across studies we tested alternative explanations for our findings by first examining the relationship between the alternative variables (e.g., self-reported understanding and positive partner perceptions) and perceived understanding, then testing whether they moderated the effect of conflict on satisfaction, and finally entering any alternative variables that were significant moderators simultaneously with perceived understanding to parse apart their unique effects. The results of such analyses in this study revealed that participants who felt more understood reported being more understanding of their partners,  $r = .69$ ,  $p < .001$  and viewed their partners more positively in general,  $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Self-reported understanding moderated the link between conflict and relationship satisfaction (Table 1, Model 3), but positive perceptions did not (Model 4). Finally, when perceived understanding and self-reported understanding were entered as simultaneous moderators, the interaction term with perceived understanding was larger but neither estimate was significant (Model 5), possibly because of the analysis being underpowered. Given this lack of clarity with regard to the unique effects of perceived understanding and self-reported understanding, we examined self-reported understanding as an alternate explanation in subsequent studies. In sum, Study 1 provides initial evidence in support of our overriding hypothesis: feeling understood appears to buffer people in more conflict-ridden relationships from feeling less satisfied relative to individuals in less conflict-ridden relationships.<sup>2</sup>

## Study 2

Study 1 arguably provided conservative evidence for our hypothesis insofar as perceived understanding was assessed at a general level, rather than in the context of a specific conflict. In Study 2, we zeroed in on the buffering effect of feeling understood in the context of a specific conflict, testing the causal link between perceived understanding and relationship satisfaction during conflict. Specifically, we examined whether participants who were reminded of a conflict in which they did not feel understood by their partners would report lower satisfaction postconflict compared to a neutral control condition, whereas those who were reminded of a conflict in which they did feel understood by their partner would not show this negative effect of conflict relative to the control condition.

We also addressed three alternative accounts: First, we once again assessed participants' self-reported understanding. Second, we looked at whether perceived understanding might buffer against reduced relationship satisfaction because people feel understood during conflicts about smaller or less important issues, which may be less damaging for relationships. Finally, we examined whether people are more likely to report feeling understood during conflicts that end up being resolved, suggesting conflict resolution, rather than perceived understanding, is what buffers against the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction.

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** One hundred ninety-one adults (85 women, 106 men) from the United States who were in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months participated in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants were recruited through Mechanical Turk (MTurk; see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Thirty-six participants (16%) were excluded from analyses: five because they failed at least one (out of 2) attention checks and 31 because they failed to complete the manipulation task correctly (i.e., only wrote a few words or wrote about an

<sup>1</sup> Couples may be less likely to engage in conflict when partners feel more understood by each other (Cahn, 1990; Gordon et al., 2013). If the association between perceived understanding and conflict is too high, it may not be appropriate to examine perceived understanding as a moderating factor of the link between conflict and relationship satisfaction. In this sample, participants who tended to feel more understood by their partners did report experiencing less conflict in their relationships ( $b = -.61$ ,  $t(133) = 8.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, three pieces of information led us to conclude that the correlation between perceived understanding and conflict was not too high: (a) perceived understanding only explained 30% of the variance in conflict ( $R^2 = .34$ ); (b) a visual inspection of the scatterplot between perceived understanding and conflict revealed that there were data points in all four quadrants of the plot; and (c) when perceived understanding and conflict were entered as simultaneous predictors of relationship satisfaction, diagnostics showed that collinearity was not a problem (Tolerance = 1).

<sup>2</sup> We tested whether the moderation of perceived understanding on the link between conflict and relationship satisfaction was further moderated by gender in this study or any of the subsequent studies. There was no evidence of gender moderation in Study 1,  $b = .05$ ,  $p > .62$ . Gender did not moderate the perceived understanding × conflict interaction in any of the other studies either (Studies 2-6;  $ps$  ranged from .14 to .93). Given this, we feel confident in concluding that there is not consistent evidence that the buffering effects of perceived understanding during conflict differ by gender. Thus, we do not discuss gender further.

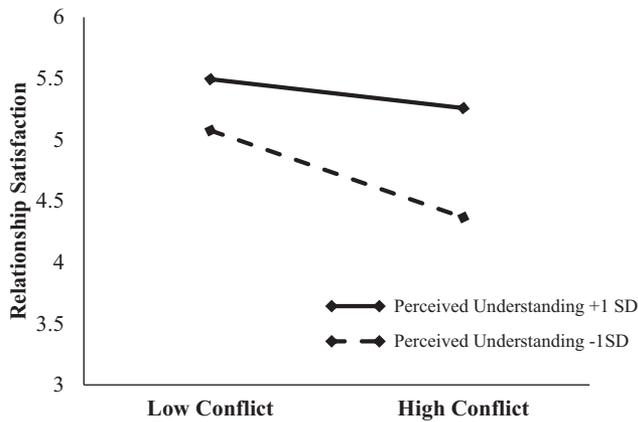


Figure 1. Perceived understanding buffers against reduced relationship satisfaction in more conflictual relationships in Study 1.

inappropriate topic). Of the remaining 155 participants, 73 were women and 82 were men. The sample was 73.5% European American, 10.3% African/African American, 5.5% Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 2.6% Hispanic, and 7.1% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were nearly 29 years old (range = 18–64), and had been in their relationships for over 4.5 years (range = 6 months to 32 years). Eight percent of participants were engaged, 42.6% cohabiting, 26.5% married, and 17% were in long-distance relationships.

Participants were directed to a secure website to first complete demographics. They were then asked to recall and write about an event in their relationship for 3 min. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the conflict with understanding condition ( $n = 52$ ), participants were instructed, “In every relationship people experience times when they disagree with their partner over something. We would now like you to recall a time when you and your partner experienced conflict in your relationship but you felt like your partner was able to understand your point of view. That is, think about a time when you and your partner disagreed and argued or fought over something but you felt understood by your partner.” In the conflict without understanding condition ( $n = 53$ ), participants saw similar instructions except that they were instructed to recall a time when they and their partner disagreed and argued or fought over something and they did not feel understood by their partner. Finally, in the “neutral condition” ( $n = 50$ ), participants were instructed, “In every relationship people experience times when they and their partner run errands together. We would now like you to recall a time when you and your partner went out and ran errands together, such as going to the grocery store, post office, or gas station.” After the writing task, all participants answered questions about the event they had recalled, including their postevent relationship satisfaction.

#### Measures.

**Event-related measures.** Participants reported how recently the event had occurred (**recency**) and how often they experienced events like the one they had described (**frequency**). Participants reported on their perceived understanding (i.e., “During this conflict/While you were running errands, how much was your partner able to understand what you were thinking and feeling?”) and their self-reported understanding (i.e., “During this conflict/While you

were running errands, how much were you able to understand what your partner was thinking and feeling?”). In the two conflict conditions, participants also reported how big of a problem the source of conflict was (problem size), and the degree to which they had reached a resolution on the conflict (conflict resolution). All items were measured on 5-point Likert scales.

**Postevent relationship satisfaction.** To measure relationship satisfaction, participants responded to two items adapted from the measure of satisfaction used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .97$ ): “After the conflict/experience, how much did you feel that you had a warm and comfortable relationship with your partner?” and “After the conflict/experience, how satisfied were you with your relationship?” (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *completely*).

## Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses.** The two conflict conditions did not differ in how recently or frequently they had fights like the recalled conflict ( $t_s < 1.24$ ,  $p_s > .22$ ). As expected, however, participants in the conflict with understanding condition reported feeling significantly more understood by their partners during the conflict ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .57$ ) relative to participants in the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(82) = 9.75$ ,  $p < .001$ , attesting to the effectiveness of our manipulation.

**Main analyses and addressing alternative accounts.** As predicted and shown in Figure 2, there was a significant effect of condition on postevent relationship satisfaction,  $F(2, 152) = 6.04$ ,  $p < .01$ . Post hoc analyses using Tukey’s Least Significant Difference revealed that participants in the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) were significantly less satisfied postevent relative to participants in the control condition ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ),  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .66$ . In contrast, postevent relationship satisfaction did not differ among participants in the conflict with understanding ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) and the control conditions,  $p > .35$ ,  $d = .18$ . Relationship satisfaction for participants in the two conflict conditions also differed significantly, such that participants who recalled a conflict in which they felt understood were more satisfied relative to participants who recalled a conflict in which they did not feel understood,  $p < .02$ ,  $d = .48$ .

Turning to alternative accounts, participants who reported a conflict in which they felt understood ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) also

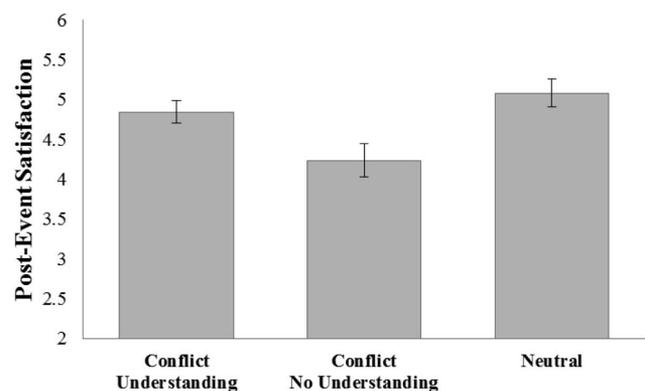


Figure 2. Condition differences in postevent relationship satisfaction in Study 2. Error bars represent  $\pm 1 SE$ .

reported being more understanding of their partners relative to participants who reported a conflict in which they did not feel understood ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(102) = 2.32$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $d = .46$ . However, when we entered ratings of perceived understanding and self-reported understanding as simultaneous mediators of the link between conflict condition and relationship satisfaction (using bootstrapping to create CIs for the indirect effects; Preacher & Hayes, 2008), perceived understanding emerged as a significant mediator (95% CI [.40, 1.65]), whereas self-reported understanding did not (95% CI [-.01, .36]). This suggests that it was differences in feeling understood by one's partner, and not being understanding of one's partner, that explained why people in the conflict with understanding condition were more satisfied postconflict than those in the conflict without understanding condition.

The two conflict conditions did not differ in problem size (*mean difference* =  $-.42$ ,  $t(102) = 1.62$ ,  $p > .10$ ,  $d = .32$ ), ruling out differential importance of issues across conditions as an alternative account for our findings. Participants in the two conditions also wrote about similar issues. That is, categorizing the sources of conflict that participants recalled revealed that the two conflict conditions overlapped on 5 out of 7 of the most frequently cited issues (i.e., money, household management, time together, issues with the opposite sex, or differences of opinion on intellectual topics).

Finally, participants in the conflict with understanding condition were more likely to report that the conflict they recalled had been resolved ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) relative to their counterparts in the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $t(88.6) = 3.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .68$ . However, when entered as simultaneous mediators of the conflict condition-relationship satisfaction link, ratings of both perceived understanding and conflict resolution were significant (95% CIs [.52, 1.54] and [.07, .62], respectively). Thus, although conflicts in which people feel understood are more likely to be resolved, this alone cannot account for the buffering effects of feeling understood on postconflict relationship satisfaction.

In sum, Study 2 provides causal evidence that recalling conflict (relative to a neutral relationship event) significantly reduces relationship satisfaction only when people do not feel understood by their partners during the conflict. More important, conflicts in the two conditions did not differ in the size of the problem or conflict topic. We also found that perceived understanding was linked to greater self-reported understanding and conflict resolution, but buffered against declines in relationship satisfaction postconflict even when accounting for any influence of these factors.

### Study 3

Although Study 2 ruled out several alternative accounts, the instructions used in the study left open the possibility of remaining differences between the conflicts recalled across the two conflict conditions. To address this concern more definitively, in Study 3 we had all participants first identify the top source of conflict in their relationships. Only after this did we ask them to imagine they were fighting with their partner about this source of conflict, randomly assigning half to imagine that their partner was able to understand their thoughts and feelings during the recalled conflict, and the other half to imagine that their partner was not able to

understand their thoughts and feelings. We anticipated replicating Study 2's results.

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** One hundred twenty-three adults (58 women, 65 men) from the United States who were in romantic relationships participated via MTurk for monetary compensation. Thirteen (11%) were excluded from analyses: 1 failed both attention checks and 12 failed to complete the manipulation task correctly (i.e., wrote about not feeling understood in the feeling understood condition and vice versa). Of the remaining 110 participants, 54 were women and 56 were men. The sample was 74.5% European American, 8.2% Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 7.3% African/African American, 4.5% Native American, 3.6% Hispanic, and 1.8% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 33.5 years old (range = 19–65), and had been in their relationships for 7 years (range = 5 months to 45.25 years). Ten percent were engaged, 39.1% were cohabiting, 60.9% were married, and 14.5% were in long-distance relationships.

Participants were directed to a secure website to first complete demographics. They were then asked to list the top source of conflict in their relationships and complete several questions about this source of conflict. Next, participants were asked to imagine that they and their partner were having a fight about the source of conflict they had identified. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the conflict with understanding condition ( $n = 47$ ), participants were instructed,

Sometimes when we have a conflict with another person, we feel that the other person doesn't understand our thoughts, feelings, and point of view. Other times, we can be at odds with another person, but still feel that the person understands our thoughts, feelings, and point of view. For this next task, we would like you to imagine that you and your partner are having a fight about this source of conflict: (the source of conflict they had identified). During this fight, we would like you to imagine that your partner is able to understand your thoughts, feelings, and point of view. That is, you feel understood by your partner. Please take a moment to imagine this fight. Picture where you are, what you and your partner are saying, how you are feeling.

In the conflict without understanding condition ( $n = 63$ ), participants read similar instructions except that they were asked to imagine that "your partner is *not* able to understand your thoughts, feelings, and point of view. That is, that you do not feel understood by your partner." Afterward, participants answered a series of questions including how satisfied they would be after the fight, and completed a manipulation check.

### Measures.

**Premanipulation measures.** After listing the top source of conflict but before taking part in the manipulation task, all participants reported on how recently and how frequently they had fought with their partner about this source of conflict, how big of a problem the source of conflict was for their relationship, the extent to which they had reached any sort of resolution on the conflict, as well as their preexisting perceived understanding (i.e., "How much do you think your partner is able to understand what you are thinking and feeling with regard to this source of conflict?") and self-reported understanding (i.e., "How much do you think you are able to understand what your partner is thinking and

feeling with regard to this source of conflict?”). All items were measured on 5-point Likert scales.

**Postmanipulation measures.** Participants responded to the same measure of relationship satisfaction used in Study 1, adapted to focus on how they would feel after the fight they had imagined ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Participants also reported on the extent to which they believed the conflict was resolved during their imagined fight.

**Manipulation check.** At the end of the study participants reported on their perceived understanding during the fight they imagined (“During the fight you just imagined, how much was your partner able to take your perspective?”), self-reported understanding (“During the fight you just imagined, how much were you able to take your partner’s perspective?”), and both the difficulty and success of imagining the fight (“How difficult was it for you to imagine a fight about your top source of conflict in your relationship?” and “How successfully were you able to imagine the fight?”) using 5-point Likert scales.

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary analyses.

**Premanipulation.** Across conditions, participants did not differ in the recency, frequency, problem size, or resolution of their conflict, nor in self-reported understanding,  $t_s < 1$ . There was a marginally significant difference in premanipulation perceived understanding, with participants already feeling more understood by their partners in the conflict with understanding condition ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) relative to the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ),  $F(1, 108) = 3.42$ ,  $p < .07$ . Thus, in all subsequent analyses we ran Analyses of Covariance to control for premanipulation perceived understanding and report the resulting  $F$ s, adjusted means, and  $SE$ s.

**Postmanipulation.** Ratings of difficulty and success at the manipulation task did not differ across conditions ( $F$ s  $< 1$ ). However, as intended, ratings of perceived understanding postmanipulation were significantly higher among participants who imagined a fight in which they felt understood by their partners ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) relative to those who imagined a fight in which they did not feel understood ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 106) = 65.78$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Main analyses and addressing alternative accounts.** As predicted, participants who imagined a fight in which their partners understood them reported they would feel significantly more satisfied after the fight ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SE = .19$ ) relative to participants who imagined a fight in which their partners did not understand them ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = .16$ ),  $F(1, 107) = 14.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .78$ . As in Study 2, participants who imagined feeling understood during a fight also reported being better able to understand their partner ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = .14$ ) relative to participants who imagined a fight in which they did not feel understood ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = .12$ ),  $F(1, 106) = 22.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.01$ . When we entered ratings of perceived understanding and self-reported understanding as simultaneous mediators of the link between conflict condition and relationship satisfaction using the same procedure from Study 2, perceived understanding emerged as a significant mediator (95% CI [.42, 1.30]), providing further evidence that our effects cannot be explained by participants’ projecting their own feelings of being understood onto their perceptions of their partners’ understanding. In contrast to the previous study, self-reported

understanding was also a unique mediator of the condition-satisfaction link, 95% CI [.12, .72]. Participants were also more likely to report having resolved the fight when they imagined feeling understood ( $M = 4.99$ ,  $SD = .26$ ) than when they imagined not feeling understood ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .23$ ),  $F(1, 107) = 27.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .58$ . However, as in Study 2, when entered simultaneously ratings of perceived understanding and conflict resolution were both significant mediators of the link between conflict condition and postconflict satisfaction (95% CIs [.48, 1.42] and [.11, .78], respectively). In sum, Study 3’s findings provided further causal evidence that feeling understood by one’s partner buffers individuals against the damaging effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction using a more controlled experimental paradigm.

## Study 4

In Study 4 we used daily experience methodology to test our hypotheses in the context of naturally occurring conflict over a 2-week period. We used participants’ daily reports to test whether feeling understood by one’s partner buffered against reduced satisfaction on days of conflict. We anticipated that participants would be less satisfied with their relationships on days with conflict relative to days without conflict, but only if they felt less understood by their partners on the conflict days. In addition to controlling for self-reported understanding, we controlled for relationship satisfaction on the prior day to rule out the possibility that our effects were due to participants who were already more satisfied with their relationships feeling more understood during conflict, and correspondingly, more satisfied after the conflict. This is an important alternative account to rule out given research showing that couples who are more satisfied enact more understanding behaviors during conflict (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1995).

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** As part of a larger study on well-being in relationships, 85 undergraduates (69 women, 14 men, 2 unknown) in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months participated for course credit. Forty-nine percent were Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 21% European/European American, 19% Hispanic, 1% African/African American, and 10% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 20.5 years old (range = 18–36), and had been in their relationship 2.5 years (range = 6 months to 10 years). Four percent of participants were engaged, 14.8% cohabiting, 2.5% married, and 63% were in long-distance relationships.

For 14 nights, participants completed a short online survey before going to bed. Some participants completed extra days, up to 17 diaries. Participants completed 881 diaries, an average of 10.36 days per person. Forty-five participants (56%) completed 12 or more diaries. Diaries completed before 6 p.m. or after 6 a.m. were not included in the final analyses. Data from two participants were removed because the participants completed more than half of their diaries late. Additional diaries were removed because they were unable to be linked to a specific date. This left data for 77 participants who completed 741 diaries on time.

**Measures.** The daily diary measures were kept brief to maintain participant motivation and maximize responses (Reis & Gable,

2000).<sup>3</sup> Among other items, participants rated the level of conflict in their relationship that day by responding to the question “Did you and your partner experience conflict in your relationship today?” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *we did not experience any conflict today*, 5 = *we experienced a lot of conflict today*). Conflict was only experienced on 29% of the days, yielding a highly skewed distribution, so we transformed it into a dichotomous variable and compared days on which there was no conflict (i.e., when people reported a 1,  $n = 523$ ) to days in which there was conflict (i.e., when people reported a 2 or higher,  $n = 213$ ).

After rating conflict in their relationships that day, participants completed several other items, including their perceived understanding (i.e., “Today, how much do you think your partner was able to accurately understand what you were thinking and feeling?”) and self-reported understanding (i.e., “Today, how much do you think you were able to accurately understand what your partner was thinking and feeling?”). Relationship satisfaction was measured with the item “Today I think that our relationship was . . . (from *Terrible* to *Terrific*)” which has been used in prior daily experience studies of romantic relationships (e.g., Gable & Poore, 2008). All items were rated on 1 to 5 Likert scales.

## Results and Discussion

**Data analysis strategy.** The data from the daily diaries consisted of up to 17 data points nested within each individual. Because these nested data violate assumptions of independence, we analyzed our data using multilevel modeling (Mixed Models, SPSS v22). We allowed for the presence of random intercepts for each of our analyses but slopes were fixed.<sup>4</sup> We specified a covariance matrix for errors in which variances were allowed to be heterogeneous across days and there were autocorrelations between covariances on consecutive days. This autoregressive approach reduces the chance of Type I errors (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).

We predicted changes in relationship satisfaction from one day to the next by including satisfaction on the prior day as a predictor (Davila & Kashy, 2009). In other words, satisfaction on day  $t + 1$  was predicted from conflict on day  $t + 1$ , perceived understanding on day  $t + 1$ , and their interaction term, controlling for relationship satisfaction on day  $t$ . All continuous predictors were grand-mean centered and conflict was coded such that  $-.5 =$  no conflict and  $.5 =$  conflict.

**Descriptive statistics.** Sixty-two participants (81%) experienced at least one conflict during the diary period (mode = 3, range = 0–15). These conflicts ranged in intensity, with 23% being higher intensity (i.e., were rated a 4 or 5 out of 5). Furthermore, participants exhibited variability in their perceived understanding and satisfaction across the 2-week period—they used the full range of both scales with average daily scores of 3.33 ( $SD = 1.18$ ) for perceived understanding and 3.95 ( $SD = 1.06$ ) for satisfaction. Only seven participants did not have any variability in their daily reports of perceived understanding and satisfaction. Finally, not surprisingly, there was a negative relationship between perceived understanding and conflict such that people felt more understood on days without conflict than days with conflict (estimated  $M_s = 3.58$  and  $2.93$ , respectively;  $F(1, 640) = 60.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Despite this relationship between conflict and understanding,

people used the full range of the perceived understanding scale on both conflict and no-conflict days.

**Main analyses and addressing alternative accounts.** The results of the main analyses are summarized in Table 2. As shown in Model 1, conflict was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, such that participants tended to report lower relationship satisfaction on days when they experienced conflict relative to days with no conflict. However, as predicted, perceived understanding moderated the association between conflict and relationship satisfaction (Model 2).<sup>5</sup> As shown in Figure 3, conflict was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction on days when participants felt less understood by their partners ( $-1 SD$ ;  $b = -.69$ ,  $t(450) = 8.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI  $[-.85, -.52]$ ), but not on days when participants felt more understood by their partners ( $1 SD$ ),  $b = -.15$ ,  $t(378) = 1.48$ ,  $p > .14$ ; 95% CI  $[-.35, .05]$ .

Once again, participants who felt more understood by their partners also reported being more understanding of their partners ( $b = .66$ ,  $t(584) = 28.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI  $[.61, .70]$ ), but feeling able to understand a partner’s thoughts and feelings did not moderate the link between conflict and satisfaction (Model 3). However, because the interaction term was marginally significant, we also entered ratings of perceived understanding and self-reported understanding as simultaneous moderators (Model 4). When entered simultaneously, only perceived understanding significantly moderated the link between conflict and relationship satisfaction.

<sup>3</sup> To establish the validity of these single-item measures, some of which were also used in Studies 2, 3, 5, 6a, and 6b, we examined whether responses to them were associated with responses to established, multi-item measures of the same constructs. Specifically, in a separate 2-week daily diary we tested whether the same daily single-item measures used in this study were significantly related to multi-item measures of the constructs assessed as background measures. Conflict in the background was measured with the 5-item scale developed by Braiker and Kelley (1979). The perceived understanding, self-reported understanding and satisfaction measures were the same as those used in Study 1 of the present investigation. Responses to all four multi-item measures significantly predicted responses to their corresponding single-item daily reports: perceived understanding,  $b = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ; self-reported understanding,  $b = .33$ ,  $p < .01$ ; conflict,  $b = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ; satisfaction  $b = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>4</sup> Extensive modeling showed that because of the nature of our analyses (i.e., interactions between two Level 1 variables) estimates for our fixed and random effects varied depending on how the variables were centered (e.g., coding conflict as 0 and 1 or  $-.5$  and  $.5$ ) in a random slopes model. The significance of random slopes changed depending on centering, and the point estimates for fixed and random effects varied, but the overall significance of all fixed effects (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ) remained consistent across the random and fixed models. Thus, for the sake of consistency and simplicity, we fixed all slopes. For more information about this centering issue, contact the first author.

<sup>5</sup> The predicted interaction was marginally significant when treating conflict as a continuous variable:  $b = .04$ ,  $t(375) = 1.90$ ,  $p < .06$ . Additionally, we parsed apart whether the moderating effect of perceived understanding was driven by within-person differences (i.e., fluctuations in perceived understanding around one’s own mean), between-person differences (i.e., differences between participants in average levels of perceived understanding across the diary), or both. To do so, we ran a follow-up analysis with person-centered perceived understanding (within-person variance) and average perceived understanding (between-person variance) as simultaneous predictors and both were treated as moderators. Results revealed that the effect was primarily driven by within-person differences: within-person interaction  $b = .30$ ,  $p < .001$  and between-person interaction  $b = .02$ ,  $p = .81$ .

To ensure our findings were not due to differences between participants who did or did not experience conflict during the diary period, we reran our analyses restricting our sample to only the 62 participants who experienced at least one conflict. We found consistent effects within this restricted sample and all significance levels remained unchanged. Most notably, the Conflict  $\times$  Perceived understanding interaction remained significant,  $b = .21$ ,  $t(377) = 3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ .

In summary, Study 4 generalizes our findings to a naturalistic setting, tapping participants' feelings as they experienced real conflicts in the daily course of their relationships. Bolstering Studies 1–3, Study 4 participants only reported lower relationship satisfaction when they experienced conflict if they felt less understood by their partners that day.

### Study 5

Study 5 had two main aims: to (a) extend our hypothesized effect to actual conflict conversations between romantic partners, and (b) test whether individuals' perceived understanding influences not only their own relationship satisfaction, but their partners' relationship satisfaction as well. To this end, we had couples engage in a videotaped conversation about a source of conflict in their relationship. We tested whether feeling understood during the conversation buffered against declines in satisfaction from pre- to postconflict for both members of the couple.

In addition to ruling out several of the alternative accounts we considered in the prior studies, we also tested differences in affective tone (i.e., how pleasant the conversation was) as an alternative explanation. More satisfied couples engage in conversations characterized by a higher ratio of positive affect to negative affect (Gottman, 1994), raising the possibility that people feel

Table 2  
Multilevel Models Predicting Daily Satisfaction in Study 4

|   | <i>b</i>         | <i>t</i> | 95% CI       |
|---|------------------|----------|--------------|
| <b>Model 1</b>                            |                  |          |              |
| Conflict                                  | -.83***          | 10.28    | [-.99, -.68] |
| Previous day satisfaction                 | .29***           | 7.76     | [.22, .36]   |
| <b>Model 2</b>                            |                  |          |              |
| Conflict                                  | -.42***          | 6.08     | [-.55, -.28] |
| Perceived understanding                   | .52***           | 18.47    | [.47, .58]   |
| Conflict $\times$ Perceived understanding | .22***           | 4.26     | [.12, .33]   |
| Previous day satisfaction                 | .14***           | 4.71     | [.08, .20]   |
| <b>Model 3</b>                            |                  |          |              |
| Conflict                                  | -.60***          | 7.92     | [-.75, -.45] |
| Self-reported understanding               | .41***           | 11.27    | [.34, .48]   |
| Conflict $\times$ Self understanding      | .12 <sup>†</sup> | 1.74     | [-.02, .24]  |
| Previous day satisfaction                 | .18***           | 5.22     | [.11, .25]   |
| <b>Model 4</b>                            |                  |          |              |
| Conflict                                  | -.42***          | 6.11     | [-.56, -.29] |
| Perceived understanding                   | .49***           | 13.48    | [.42, .56]   |
| Conflict $\times$ Perceived understanding | .30***           | 4.14     | [.16, .44]   |
| Self-reported understanding               | .04              | 1.01     | [-.04, .12]  |
| Conflict $\times$ Self understanding      | -.11             | 1.33     | [-.26, .05]  |
| Previous day satisfaction                 | .13***           | 4.41     | [.07, .19]   |

Note. Estimates are unstandardized. Degrees of freedom are calculated using the Satterthwaite (1946) approximation that yields degrees of freedom that are somewhere between the number of individuals and the number of days. CI = confidence interval.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .09$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

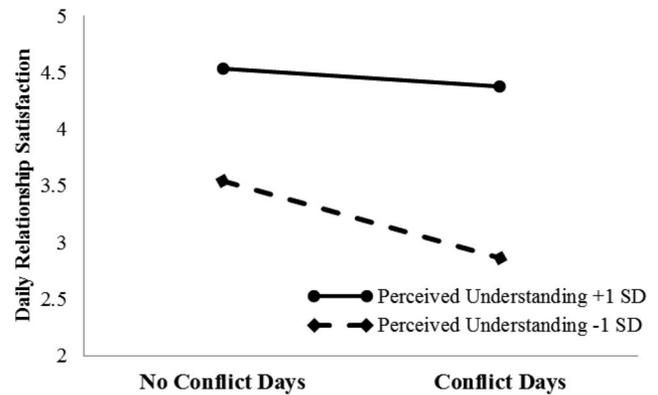


Figure 3. Perceived understanding on days of conflict buffers against decreases in satisfaction from the previous day in Study 4.

more understood by their partners and are more satisfied if the conflict is characterized by more positivity and less negativity. To assess this possibility, we had independent observers rate the affective tone of the videotaped conversations.

### Method

**Participants and procedure.** As part of a larger study on understanding in romantic relationships, 71 heterosexual romantic couples participated for \$10 per individual or course credit.<sup>6</sup> Two couples were excluded from analyses because at least one partner completed postconflict items before the conflict conversation. Forty-three percent were Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 36% European/European American, 9% Hispanic, 1% African/African American, and 12% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 22 years old (range = 18–56), and had been in their relationship for 21 months (range = 1–87). Three percent of participants were engaged, 35.2% cohabiting, 4.2% married, and 11.3% were in long-distance relationships.

Couples were recruited through online websites, community flyers, and psychology research participant pools. When couples arrived at the laboratory, the two members of the couple were directed to separate computers to complete items assessing their current feelings about their relationships. They then took part in two videotaped conversations. The first was designed to help couples get comfortable conversing in the laboratory. For this task, couples were given 4 min to work together ranking items needed for survival if they were stranded in the Far North (Winter Survival Exercise; Johnson & Johnson, 2003). The second conversation was about a source of conflict in their relationship. For this conversation, both partners listed the top three sources of conflict in their relationship at the beginning of the session and later one partner was randomly assigned to pick the topic for the conversation from one of the three that they had listed. Couples were given 5 min to work toward a resolution of the conflict. Afterward, the members of the couple returned to separate computers to answer items assessing their feelings during and after the conflict conversation.

<sup>6</sup> For additional articles using data from this study to test other hypotheses (e.g., sleep, power, depression), see Gordon & Chen, 2013; Gordon & Chen, 2014; Gordon et al., 2013.

**Measures.** Perceived and self-reported understanding were measured with the same single-item measures used in Study 4, but were adapted to be specific to understanding between partners during the laboratory conflict conversation (i.e., “During the conversation you just had . . .”). Average perceived understanding was 2.71 ( $SD = 1.01$ , range = 0–4). Average self-reported understanding was 2.93 ( $SD = .80$ , range = 0–4). Relationship satisfaction was measured at the start of the laboratory session ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .74$ , range = 0–4), and right after the conflict conversation ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = .62$ , range = 0–4) with the same item used in Study 4, adapted to be about their current feelings. Preconflict satisfaction was subtracted from postconflict satisfaction to create a satisfaction discrepancy score ( $M = -.12$ ,  $SD = .52$ , range = –2–1) which was our primary outcome variable.

Participants also reported how big of a problem the source of conflict they discussed was (problem size;  $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ , range = 0–4), and the degree to which they had reached a resolution about the conflict during the conversation (conflict resolution;  $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ , range = 0–4). All items were rated on 5-point Likert scales.

Using the videotapes of the conflict conversations, three coders independently rated each couple for the extent to which their conversation was **positive** ( $ICC = .95$ ) and **negative** ( $ICC = .94$ ). We divided the positive score by the negative score to create a ratio of positivity to negativity ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ , range = .17–6.33).

## Results and Discussion

**Data analysis strategy.** Given that participants were nested within romantic couples, we conducted our analyses using multi-level modeling (Mixed Models; SPSS v22) to control for nonindependence between partners (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Couples were treated as distinguishable, with gender as the distinguishing variable. All analyses with relationship satisfaction as the outcome variable predicted changes in satisfaction pre- to postconflict (i.e., satisfaction discrepancy score) and controlled for preconflict satisfaction to account for any existing differences in relationship satisfaction between participants.

When testing for partner effects, we utilized the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) that simultaneously assesses the unique effects of one’s own predictor on one’s own outcome (actor effect) and one’s partner’s outcome (partner effect). This approach allowed us to examine whether partners of participants who felt more understood were also buffered against declines in satisfaction and, importantly, whether this buffering effect occurred above and beyond any benefits the partners experienced from feeling understood themselves.

### Main analyses and addressing alternative accounts.

**Actor effects.** The primary results for changes in participants’ own satisfaction as a function of perceived understanding are in Table 3. First, we examined the main effect of the conflict conversation on relationship satisfaction by predicting change in satisfaction using an intercept-only model (we did not control for baseline satisfaction in this model). As shown in Model 1, participants were marginally significantly less satisfied postconflict than when they first arrived in the laboratory. However, as predicted and shown in Model 2, perceived understanding during the conflict conversation was positively associated with changes in satisfaction

Table 3  
*Models Predicting Change in Actor Satisfaction Pre- to Postconflict Conversation in Study 5*

|                             | <i>b</i>          | <i>t</i> | 95% CI       |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------------|
| Model 1                     |                   |          |              |
| Intercept                   | –.08 <sup>†</sup> | 1.94     | [–.16, .002] |
| Model 2                     |                   |          |              |
| Perceived understanding     | .24***            | 5.80     | [.16, .32]   |
| Preconflict satisfaction    | –.26***           | 4.16     | [–.38, –.13] |
| Model 3                     |                   |          |              |
| Perceived understanding     | .19***            | 3.55     | [.08, .29]   |
| Self-reported understanding | .10               | 1.61     | [–.02, .22]  |
| Preconflict satisfaction    | –.25***           | 4.08     | [–.37, –.13] |
| Model 4                     |                   |          |              |
| Perceived understanding     | .22***            | 5.06     | [.13, .30]   |
| Conflict resolution         | .06               | 1.41     | [–.02, .14]  |
| Preconflict satisfaction    | –.27***           | 5.22     | [–.40, –.15] |
| Model 5                     |                   |          |              |
| Perceived understanding     | .23***            | 5.25     | [.14, .32]   |
| Affective tone              | .003              | .11      | [–.06, .07]  |
| Preconflict satisfaction    | –.26***           | 4.09     | [–.48, –.02] |

*Note.* Estimates are unstandardized. Degrees of freedom are calculated using the Satterthwaite (1946) approximation that yields degrees of freedom that are somewhere between the number of individuals and the number of days. CI = confidence interval.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .06$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

from pre- to postconflict controlling for baseline satisfaction. To further examine these effects we predicted changes in satisfaction for participants higher and lower in perceived understanding following the simple-slopes guidelines suggested by Aiken and West (1991). As depicted in Figure 4a, participants who felt less understood by their partners experienced declines in satisfaction after the conflict conversation ( $-1 SD$ ),  $b = -.33$ ,  $t(95) = 5.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI [–.44, –.22]. In contrast, participants who felt more understood did not experience declines in satisfaction and, in fact, experienced increases in satisfaction from pre- to postconflict ( $1 SD$ ),  $b = .15$ ,  $t(93) = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ; 95% CI [.04, .26]. In other words, participants who tended not to feel understood by their partner during the conflict conversation experienced the expected reduction in satisfaction, but those who tended to feel understood by their partners actually reported being more satisfied with their relationships than they were before having the conflict conversation.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to alternative accounts, people who felt more understood by their partners during the conflict also reported being more understanding ( $b = .50$ ,  $t(109) = 9.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI [.39, .60]), and self-reported understanding was associated with changes in satisfaction,  $b = .22$ ,  $t(109) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI [.13, .32]. However, as shown in Model 3, when ratings of perceived understanding and self-reported understanding were entered as simulta-

<sup>7</sup> Given that one partner chose the topic, we examined whether our results held for both partners. Feeling understood buffered against declines in satisfaction for both the partner who chose the topic ( $b = .30$ ,  $t(129) = 5.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI [.19, .41]) and the partner who did not ( $b = .17$ ,  $t(130) = 2.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ; 95% CI [.05, .29]). These two effects did not differ significantly from each other,  $b = .11$ ,  $t(104) = 1.42$ ,  $p > .15$ ; 95% CI [–.04, .26]. Choosing the topic or not also did not moderate the effect of perceived understanding on the partner’s change in satisfaction, interaction  $b = .03$ ,  $t < 1$ ; 95% CI [–.12, .18].

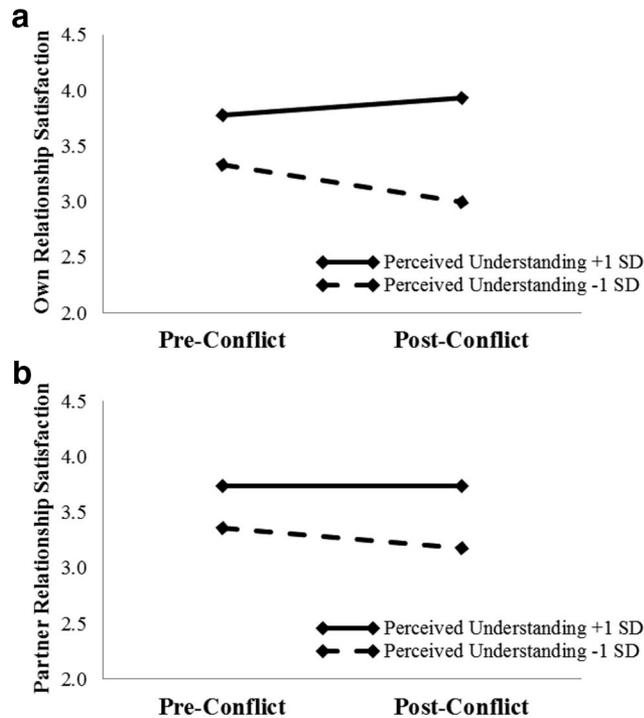


Figure 4. (a) Perceived understanding during conflict buffers against declines in one's own relationship satisfaction pre- to postconflict in Study 5 (actor effect). (b) Perceived understanding during conflict buffers against declines in partners' relationship satisfaction pre- to postconflict in Study 5 (partner effect).

neously predictors of change in relationship satisfaction, only feeling understood by one's romantic partner buffered against declines in satisfaction.

As in Studies 2 and 3, the extent to which participants felt understood by their partners was not a function of the size of the problem,  $b = -.12$ ,  $t(131) = 1.39$ ,  $p > .16$ ; 95% CI  $[-.29, .05]$ . Participants who reported feeling more understood by their partners during the conflict conversation were, however, more likely to report resolving the conflict relative to their less-understood counterparts ( $b = .25$ ,  $t(113) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ; 95% CI  $[.09, .41]$ ), and conflict resolution was associated with changes in satisfaction pre- to postconflict,  $b = .11$ ,  $t(101) = 2.61$ ,  $p = .01$ ; 95% CI  $[.03, .20]$ . However, when entered simultaneously, perceived understanding continued to significantly predict changes in satisfaction pre- to postconflict whereas conflict resolution did not (Model 4).

Finally, we tested whether our effects could be explained by participants feeling more understood because their conversations were characterized by a more positive affective tone. As anticipated, members of couples who had conversations that were coded as having a higher ratio of positive to negative affect tended to report feeling more understood ( $b = .30$ ,  $t(66) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI  $[.15, .44]$ ), and affective tone was marginally significantly associated with changes in satisfaction,  $b = .06$ ,  $t(69) = 1.80$ ,  $p < .08$ ; 95% CI  $[-.01, .14]$ . However, as shown in Model 5, when controlling for the affective tone of the conversation, perceived understanding at the level of the couple continued to significantly predict changes in satisfaction pre- to postconflict whereas affective tone did not.

**Partner effects.** The primary results for partner effects are shown in Table 4. Regarding partner effects, partners of participants who felt more understood were also buffered from declines in satisfaction after the conflict conversation, even controlling for partners' own feelings of being understood. That is, as depicted in Figure 4b, among participants who felt less understood, their partners experienced declines in satisfaction pre- to postconflict ( $-1 SD$ ),  $b = -.18$ ,  $t(97) = 3.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ; 95% CI  $[-.29, -.06]$ . In contrast, among participants who felt more understood, their partners experienced no significant change in satisfaction pre- to postconflict ( $1 SD$ ),  $b = .004$ ,  $t < 1$ ; 95% CI  $[-.11, .12]$ . These results suggest that feeling understood by one's partner may be beneficial for *both* members of the couple.

In parallel to the actor effects, we explored whether the effects of perceived understanding on partner satisfaction held when controlling for the extent to which participants reported being understanding of their partners and perceived the conflict as resolved, as well as the affective tone of the conversation. We did not test problem size as an alternative explanation since it was not associated with perceived understanding. All three alternative accounts were associated with changes in partner satisfaction pre- to postconflict,  $b$ s  $> .06$  and  $< .19$ ,  $p$ s  $< .08$  &  $> .001$ . As shown in Model 2, when entered simultaneously, neither actor perceived understanding nor actor self-reported understanding significantly predicted changes in partner satisfaction. We note that when the partner's perceived understanding (that is likely to have substantial overlap with actor perceived understanding and self-reported understanding) is not included in the model, actor perceived understanding does significantly predicts changes in partner satisfaction whereas self-reported understanding does not (perceived understanding  $b = .12$ ,  $t(103) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .03$ ; 95% CI  $[.01, .23]$ ;

Table 4  
Models Predicting Change in Partner Satisfaction Pre- to Postconflict Conversation in Study 5

|                                  | <i>b</i>         | <i>t</i> | 95% CI       |
|----------------------------------|------------------|----------|--------------|
| <b>Model 1</b>                   |                  |          |              |
| Actor perceived understanding    | .09*             | 2.04     | [.002, .18]  |
| Partner perceived understanding  | .20***           | 4.34     | [.11, .29]   |
| Partner preconflict satisfaction | -.30***          | 4.62     | [-.42, -.17] |
| <b>Model 2</b>                   |                  |          |              |
| Actor perceived understanding    | .08              | 1.46     | [-.03, .18]  |
| Partner perceived understanding  | .19***           | 4.10     | [.10, .28]   |
| Actor self-report understanding  | .03              | .41      | [-.10, .15]  |
| Partner preconflict satisfaction | .14***           | 4.71     | [-.42, -.16] |
| <b>Model 3</b>                   |                  |          |              |
| Actor perceived understanding    | .09 <sup>†</sup> | 1.95     | [-.002, .17] |
| Partner perceived understanding  | .19***           | 4.03     | [.10, .29]   |
| Actor conflict resolution        | .01              | .28      | [-.07, .10]  |
| Partner preconflict satisfaction | -.30***          | 4.61     | [-.42, -.17] |
| <b>Model 4</b>                   |                  |          |              |
| Actor perceived understanding    | .10*             | 2.21     | [.01, .19]   |
| Partner perceived understanding  | .19***           | 4.02     | [.10, .28]   |
| Affective tone                   | .01              | .39      | [-.08, .05]  |
| Partner preconflict satisfaction | -.30***          | 4.57     | [-.43, -.17] |

Note. Estimates are unstandardized. Degrees of freedom are calculated using the Satterthwaite (1946) approximation that yields degrees of freedom that are somewhere between the number of individuals and the number of days. CI = confidence interval.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .06$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

self-reported understanding  $b = .10$ ,  $t(112) = 1.56$ ,  $p > .12$ ; 95% CI  $[-.03, .23]$ ).

Participants' reports of feeling understood continued to predict their partners' change in satisfaction when controlling for conflict resolution (marginally significant, see Model 3), and affective tone (Model 4), whereas conflict resolution and affective tone did not uniquely predict partners' satisfaction. This final result is important because it suggests that the effect of perceived understanding on partner satisfaction is not just a function of both partners being influenced by the affective tone of the conversation.

In sum, in Study 5 we found actor effects that conceptually replicate and extend our previous studies. Participants who felt more understood were buffered against reduced relationship satisfaction after an actual conversation between romantic partners about a top source of conflict in their relationship. In fact, participants who felt more understood by their partners during the conflict conversation were actually more satisfied after the conversation than when they first arrived in the laboratory.

We also found evidence of partner effects such that feeling understood by one's partner appeared to buffer against declines in relationship satisfaction after the conflict conversation not just for participants but also for their partners. Importantly, this effect held above and beyond the benefits of partners themselves feeling more understood. Caution should be exercised in overinterpreting these partner findings given that we only tested for such effects in this study; but the effect of perceived understanding on partner satisfaction does speak to the interdependence between partners during conflict. That is, the intrapersonal experience of perceived understanding (or lack thereof) appears to have interpersonal implications. It also hints that perceptions of understanding are likely tied to conflict behaviors. That is, if one partner's perceptions are able to influence the satisfaction of the other partner, then these perceptions are likely being transmitted from one partner to the other through observable behaviors, a notion we return to in the General Discussion. Finally, as in the previous studies, we ruled out a number of alternative accounts, adding affective tone of the conflict conversation to the list.

### Studies 6a and 6b

In our final two studies, we turned to the question of mechanism. If conflicts in which people feel understood are not damaging for relationship satisfaction, as our data clearly suggest, what is it about these conflicts that buffers couples from the often negative effects of fighting? On the basis of Studies 1–5, we conclude that feeling understood by one's partner does not provide buffering effects because of people being more understanding themselves, having more positive views of their partners, talking about smaller problems or different issues, resolving the conflict, or engaging in more pleasant conversations. So what is it? Does perceived understanding simply have a direct positive effect on relationship satisfaction, as suggested by the perceived understanding literature—or are there other possible accounts we have not considered? For example, perhaps perceived understanding changes the meaning of the conflict in some way? To explore this question of mechanism, we first took a qualitative approach, asking participants to tell us, in an open-ended format, whether they felt more satisfied after conflicts in which they felt understood relative to those in which they did not feel understood and, if so,

why (Study 6a). We then created close-ended questions based on the recurring themes present in participants' open-ended responses and tested them as potential mediators in a second sample of participants (Study 6b). This two-pronged approach enabled us to provide at least a first glimpse into why feeling understood may negate the potentially ill effects of conflict.

### Study 6a

For Study 6a, the qualitative prong of our approach, we first asked participants to describe conflicts in which they did and did not feel understood. We then asked them to rate which they felt more satisfied or less dissatisfied after (or if the two types of conflict were equally satisfying/dissatisfying), and why they felt that way using an open-ended format. We then analyzed these open-ended responses to identify the most frequently recurring themes.

### Methods

**Participants and procedure.** Fifty-two adults (37 women, 17 men) from the United States who were in a romantic relationship took part in this study via MTurk for monetary compensation. Three (6%) were excluded from analyses, two for not completing the open-ended prompt, and one for misunderstanding the prompt (i.e., marking an answer that was opposite of what they described in the open-ended prompt). All participants completed the attention check correctly. The sample was 75.5% European American, 8.1% Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6.1% African/African American, 6.1% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 2% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 33 years old (range = 19–60), and had been in their relationships for 8.6 years (range = 9 months to 33.6 years). Ten percent of participants were engaged, 31% cohabiting, 50% married, and 10% were in long-distance relationships.

Participants were directed to a secure website to first complete demographics. Next, all participants were instructed "In this next section, we would like to find out about how people experience conflict in their relationships. We will ask you to recall two different types of conflict, write about the conflicts, and answer questions about them." They were then asked to describe a previous conflict in which they felt understood by their partner and a previous conflict in which they did not feel understood by their partner (order of recall was counterbalanced across participants). For each conflict, participants were required to write for 2 min before they could move onto the next question. After describing each conflict and responding to several questions regarding the conflict, participants were asked to rate which type of conflict was more satisfying (or less dissatisfying) and then describe why.

For the conflict with understanding, participants were instructed "We would now like you to recall a time when you and your partner experienced conflict in your relationship but you felt like your partner was able to understand your point of view. That is, think about a time when you and your partner disagreed and argued or fought over something but you felt understood by your partner. When you have thought of a specific time, please click to move on and write about the time you just recalled." For the conflict without understanding, participants received the same instructions except that they were instructed to recall a time when

“you felt like your partner was not able to understand your point of view. That is, think about a time when you and your partner disagreed and argued or fought over something and you did not feel understood by your partner.” For both conflicts, participants were then presented with several prompts, each with its own textbox: “What was the conflict about?”; “What made you feel (not) understood by your partner?”; “How did you feel during the conflict?”; and “What emotions did you experience?” These prompts were included to encourage participants to really relive and describe their experience in detail.

#### Measures.

**Conflict characteristics.** For each conflict, participants reported on its recency and frequency and the size of the problem. They also reported perceived understanding with regard to the conflict using the same item from Study 2. All items used 6-point Likert scales.

**Postconflict satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured in two ways: First, after describing each conflict, participants responded to the question, “After the conflict, how satisfied were you with your relationship?” from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *completely*. Second, participants were asked to compare their satisfaction after the two conflicts using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *I am more satisfied (or less dissatisfied) after conflicts when I DON'T FEEL UNDERSTOOD*, 4 = *I am equally satisfied (or dissatisfied) after both types of conflicts*, 7 = *I am more satisfied (or less dissatisfied) after conflicts when I FEEL UNDERSTOOD*).

**Open-ended prompt.** Based on their responses to the relationship satisfaction prompt asking them to compare their satisfaction after the two types of conflict, participants were directed to an open-ended question that asked them to describe *why* they felt this way.

## Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses.** A series of mixed analyses of variance with conflict type as a within-subjects variable and order as a between-subjects variable revealed that there were no significant order effects for any of our dependent variables ( $ps > .31$ ,  $\eta_p^2s < .03$ ), and order did not modify any of our condition effects ( $ps > .35$ ,  $\eta_p^2s < .02$ , except recency  $p > .08$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .07$ ); thus, subsequent analyses were conducted without controlling for order.

Supporting the validity of our within-subjects manipulation, participants reported feeling more understood by their partners during the conflict with understanding ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) relative to the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(48) = 13.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . As in the prior studies, conflicts with and without understanding did not differ in terms of recency, frequency, or problem size ( $ts < 1.26$ ,  $ps > .21$ ), but participants reported significantly more satisfaction after conflicts in which they felt understood by their partners ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) compared with conflicts in which they did not feel understood ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ),  $t(48) = 8.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.17$ .

When asked to compare the two types of conflict explicitly, participants tended to report being more satisfied when they felt understood ( $M = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). This mean was significantly greater than 4 (i.e., the midpoint of the scale) that denoted both conflicts as equally satisfying/dissatisfying,  $t(48) = 11.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.86$ . In fact, of the 49 participants, 39 (80%) had a score above the midpoint (nine had scores at the midpoint, reporting equal satisfaction for the two conflict types, and one had a score below the midpoint), suggesting that most people see conflicts with understanding as more beneficial than conflicts without understanding.

**Analyses of open-ended responses.** To gain an initial understanding of *why* feeling understood during conflict helps buffer people from reduced relationship satisfaction postconflict, the two authors separately read the 39 relevant narratives, pulling out the top 7–10 recurring themes. We then compared our top themes and found that they fell into four overarching themes (see Table 5 for examples). Narratives were allowed to reflect more than one theme and, indeed, 44% of the narratives mentioned two or more of the four overarching themes, highlighting that there are likely multiple reasons why feeling understood during conflict is beneficial. The first theme represented the direct benefits of feeling understood. The other three themes captured more indirect reasons why feeling understood during conflict is beneficial. Participants consistently noted that feeling understood signals something positive about the relationship, makes them feel like a team, and *strengthens the relationship*. They also remarked that feeling understood during conflict shows that *one's partner is caring and invested in the relationship*. Finally, participants felt that conflicts character-

Table 5

*Most Frequently Mentioned Reasons Why Perceived Understanding Buffers Against Reduced Relationship Satisfaction Postconflict as Derived From Open-Ended Responses in Study 6a*

| Theme                                      | Mentioned in . . . | Examples   |
|--|--------------------|--|
| Direct benefits of perceived understanding | 41% of narratives  | “At least I know my partner understands where I am coming from.”<br>“I feel more satisfied/less dissatisfied after conflicts when I feel understood because it is nice to know that my opinions are taken into consideration whether my partner actually agrees with me or not.” |
| Strengthens relationship                   | 26% of narratives  | “If we are arguing and he takes the time to see my side it makes me feel like . . . we have a good relationship with strong communication.”<br>“When he doesn't understand me, we are in two different places, and that is not good for the relationship.”                       |
| Partner invested and caring                | 38% of narratives  | “When he understands me, I feel as though he's made some kind of sacrifice that required him to act against his beliefs, his sense of self - I mean, that takes effort.”<br>“It is more satisfying to feel . . . like he cares enough to understand why I feel the way I do.”    |
| Conflict resolution                        | 44% of narratives  | “Because she sees thing from my perspective and it is a lot easier to compromise.”<br>“I feel like we actually come to conclusions . . . and it prevents fights from popping up in the future.”  |

ized by understanding are *more likely to be resolved* and less likely to be problems again in the future. This theme is in line with our findings in Studies 2, 3, and 5 that conflicts in which participants felt more understood were more likely to be resolved. In Studies 2 and 3, ratings of perceived understanding and conflict resolution uniquely mediated the link between conflict condition and relationship satisfaction. In Study 5, only perceived understanding predicted changes in satisfaction pre- to postconflict when they were entered as simultaneous predictors. Despite these inconsistent findings with conflict resolution in our previous studies, we included it in Study 6b as a possible mediator of our effects since it was one of the top recurring themes in participants' open-ended narratives.

### Study 6b

To assess the potential mechanisms suggested by Study 6a, we created close-ended items representing the three broad themes that captured the most frequent reasons why perceived understanding buffers against the negative effects of conflict (i.e., shows people their relationship is good and strengthens the relationship, signals that one's partner is invested and caring, and leads to conflict resolution and less problems in the future). We used the same experimental paradigm from Study 3 in which participants reported a source of conflict and then imagined that they were fighting with their partner about that source of conflict and either did or did not feel understood by their partner.

### Method

**Participants and procedure.** One hundred twenty-four adults (59 women, 64 men) from the United States who were in a romantic relationship took part in this experiment via MTurk for monetary compensation. Twelve (10%) were excluded from analyses: 1 failed two (out of 3) attention checks, 4 reported they had been given the opposite instructions (e.g., instructed to write about not feeling understood in the feeling understood condition), and 7 wrote incorrect narratives (e.g., reported that they never had conflict or could not imagine such a fight). Of the remaining 112 participants, 56 were women and 55 were men. The sample was primarily 74.1% European American, 7.1% Asian/Asian American, 8% African/African American, 8% Hispanic, and 1.8% Other Ethnicity. On average, participants were 34 years old (range = 19–73), and had been in their relationships for 7.25 years (range = 6 months to 52.8 years). Ten percent were engaged, 45.5% cohabiting, 35.7% married, and 7.1% were in long-distance relationships.

Participants followed the same experimental procedure described in Study 3 (conflict with understanding condition,  $n = 54$ ; conflict without understanding condition,  $n = 58$ ), with the addition of several close-ended items assessing the three possible mechanisms.

**Measures.** After participants completed the same measures and manipulation described in Study 3 (Postconflict Relationship Satisfaction  $\alpha = .95$ ), they indicated their agreement with items tapping the effect of conflict on the strength of the relationship: "I would feel like in the end the conflict was good for our relationship," "I would feel like my partner and I are a team" and "I would feel like our relationship was worse than it was before the conflict"

(reverse scored;  $\alpha = .72$ ). Perceptions about the partner's investment and caring were assessed with the items "I would feel like my partner is invested in my relationship," "I would feel like my partner isn't willing to put effort into our relationship," and "I would feel like my partner doesn't really care about me" (last two reverse scored;  $\alpha = .81$ ). Finally, beliefs about the resolution of the conflict were assessed with the items "I would feel like we had resolved the conflict" and "I would feel that it is likely we will have to deal with this problem again in the future" (reverse scored;  $\alpha = .60$ ). All items were measured on 6-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *completely*).

### Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses.** No condition differences were found for recency, frequency, problem size, or conflict resolution, nor for the extent to which participants felt their partner had already taken their perspective on the conflict,  $t_s < 1$ . Participants reported being already marginally significantly less understanding of their partners in the conflict with understanding condition ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) than in the conflict without understanding condition ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .76$ ;  $t(110) = 1.77$ ,  $p < .08$ ); thus, in all subsequent analyses we ran analyses of covariance to control for preexisting levels of self-reported understanding and report the resulting  $F$ s, adjusted means, and  $SE$ s.

Across conditions, participants reported similar difficulty and success in undertaking the manipulation task,  $F_s < 1$ . Supporting the effectiveness of our manipulation, participants who were instructed to imagine a fight in which they felt understood by their partners ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) reported that their partners took their perspective during the fight significantly more than participants who were instructed to imagine a fight in which they did not feel understood by their partners ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SE = .13$ ),  $F(1, 109) = 93.69$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Main analyses and addressing alternative accounts.** Adjusted means, significance tests and effect sizes are reported in Table 6. Participants who imagined a fight in which they felt understood reported that they would feel significantly more satisfied after the fight relative to participants who imagined a fight in which they did not feel understood. In terms of condition differences for the three potential mechanisms captured in Study 6a—relative to participants who imagined a fight in which they did not feel understood, participants who imagined a fight in which they did feel understood reported that the conflict signaled their relationship was good and would strengthen their relationship more, signaled their partner's investment and caring more, and lead to greater resolution.

To test whether the three mechanisms could account for the buffering effect of perceived understanding on postconflict relationship satisfaction, we entered them as simultaneous mediators of the link between conflict condition and postconflict satisfaction. As shown in Table 7, the results of this multiple mediator model revealed that seeing the relationship as strengthened and one's partner as invested and caring both helped explain why people in the conflict with understanding condition were more satisfied relative to their counterparts in the conflict without understanding condition (Model 2). Although participants reported greater resolution when imagining conflicts in which they felt understood,

Table 6  
Means for Postconflict Relationship Satisfaction and the Three Indirect Mechanisms in Study 6b

|                             | Conflict with Understanding<br>Adjusted <i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | Conflict without Understanding<br>Adjusted <i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | Condition differences |                  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|-----------------------|------------------|
|                             |  |   | <i>F</i> (1, 109)     | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
| Relationship satisfaction   | 4.23 (.17)   | 2.99 (.17)  | 25.86***              | .77              |
| Strengthens relationship    | 4.18 (.15)   | 3.20 (.14)  | 23.04***              | .86              |
| Partner invested and caring | 5.18 (.15)   | 4.11 (.14)  | 27.02***              | .93              |
| Conflict resolution         | 3.44 (.17)   | 2.25 (.16)  | 26.35***              | .82              |

Note. Adjusted means control for preexisting differences in self-reported understanding; Cohen's *d* is calculated using adjusted means and  $MS_{\text{error}}$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

conflict resolution did not uniquely explain condition differences in relationship satisfaction.

In Study 6a, a substantial percentage of participants remarked on the direct benefits of feeling understood by their partners; thus, we ran a second mediational model that included the item assessing perceived understanding during the imagined conflict to capture the direct benefits of feeling understood. As shown in Model 3 in Table 7, strengthening the relationship and showing that one's partner is invested and caring continued to be significant reasons why people in the conflict with understanding condition were more satisfied, but there was also a significant direct effect of perceived understanding, suggesting feeling understood is in and of itself a benefit as well.

Taken together, the results from Studies 6a and 6b provide additional causal evidence that people are more satisfied after conflicts in which they feel understood. These results also extend the previous findings by taking the first step in examining mechanisms underlying the buffering effect of feeling understood on reduced relationship satisfaction postconflict. We found that feeling understood appears to confer direct benefits—it is simply satisfying to know your partner understands you during conflict,

which makes sense given evidence that perceived understanding activates regions of the brain associated with reward (Morelli et al., 2014). However, we also found initial evidence that feeling understood during the conflict may buffer against reduced satisfaction by allowing partners to see the conflict as good for their relationships and to see their partners as invested and caring.

Participants also reported feeling more satisfied when they felt understood during conflict because it helped them resolve the conflict, but conflict resolution was not a significant mediator when pitted against the other two mechanisms we tested. This finding is consistent with our prior studies, and suggests that while people are better able to resolve conflict when they feel understood, it may be the other ways in which feeling understood changes the meaning of conflict that more proximally influence relationship satisfaction.

The mechanisms we examined in this final pair of exploratory studies corresponded to broad categories about the state of one's relationship, perceptions of one's partner, and the outcome of the conflict in question. In this way we hoped to shed initial light on some of the overarching reasons why perceived understanding might buffer against reduced relationship satisfaction after conflict. Although we used a bottom-up approach in Study 6a, rather than specifying mechanisms on an a priori basis, the mechanisms that emerged cohere well with existing theory. Interdependence theorists posit that partners observe each other in diagnostic situations—such as situations in which their and their partner's interests conflict—and trust grows when partners behave prosocially (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). In line with this, we found that people regarded feeling understood by their partners during conflict as signaling something about the state of their relationship and their partner's investment and caring.

The above said, we underscore that this final pair of studies is an initial step in elucidating the mechanisms underlying our effects. There likely are other mechanisms not captured here, and more work is needed to break down our broad themes into more specific constructs. We also point out that we looked at which mechanisms explained our effects across participants, but it may be that for certain individuals or at certain stages of the relationship perceived understanding during conflict is beneficial for some reasons more so than others.

## General Discussion

The history of research on conflict in close relationships is long and varied. The majority of work highlights the negative conse-

Table 7  
Mediational Analyses in Study 6b

| DV: Relationship satisfaction postconflict | <i>B</i> | <i>t</i> | 95% CI for indirect effect |
|--|----------|----------|----------------------------|
| Model 1                                    |          |          |                            |
| Conflict condition                         | .42***   | 4.89     |                            |
| Model 2                                    |          |          |                            |
| Conflict condition                         | .02      | .28      |                            |
| Strengthens relationship                   | .52***   | 4.77     | [.43, 1.24]                |
| Partner invested and caring                | .25**    | 2.95     | [.09, .58]                 |
| Conflict resolution                        | .08      | .91      | [−.16, .38]                |
| Model 3                                    |          |          |                            |
| Conflict condition                         | −.09     | −1.13    |                            |
| Strengthens relationship                   | .45***   | 3.76     | [.29, 1.04]                |
| Partner invested and caring                | .25**    | 3.08     | [.08, .61]                 |
| Conflict resolution                        | .02      | .21      | [−.25, .28]                |
| Perceived understanding                    | .28**    | 2.71     | [.08, 1.01]                |

Note. Confidence intervals (CIs) for indirect effects are bias corrected and accelerated, calculated using 5,000 resamples, and based on unstandardized regression estimates. To control for preexisting differences in self-reported understanding between conflict conditions, self-reported understanding was partialled out from conflict condition before running these analyses.

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

quences of conflict for the health and well-being of couples and their families (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The current set of studies, however, builds on a small body of work examining whether conflict in relationships is always detrimental, putting forth the hypothesis that perceived understanding protects relationships from the harmful effects of conflict. Using diverse methods, seven studies yielded converging results showing that conflict is only negatively associated with relationship satisfaction postconflict when people do not feel their thoughts, feelings, and point of view are understood by their romantic partners. This key finding emerged cross-sectionally (Study 1), experimentally (Studies 2, 3, 6a and 6b), in daily life (Study 4), and in the context of a conflict conversation in the laboratory (Study 5). Our results could not be explained by people who felt understood being more understanding themselves or having more general positive perceptions of their partner, fighting about less important or different types of problems, engaging in more pleasant conversations, reaching a resolution to the conflict, or already being more satisfied with the relationship before the conflict.

In a final pair of studies (Studies 6a and 6b), we sought to uncover potential mechanisms that might help explain the ways in which perceived understanding buffers against the negative impact of conflict. Together, these studies yielded initial evidence suggesting that feeling understood during conflict is directly beneficial for relationship satisfaction, but may also protect against reduced relationship satisfaction after a conflict by conveying important information about the quality of the relationship—namely, by signaling to people that their relationship is good and possibly strengthened as a result of the conflict, as well as by showing people that their partner cares about them and is invested in the relationship. Finally, although nearly all of our studies showed that conflicts in which people felt understood were more likely to be resolved, Study 6b's findings suggest that perceived understanding and conflict resolution may play unique roles in buffering against the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction.

Taken as a whole, these studies fit squarely with the existing conflict literature, while at the same time significantly advancing it. Specifically, the majority of extant research suggests that conflict has negative consequences for relationships—a negative association that we, too, found in several of our studies when perceived understanding was not accounted for (Studies 1, 4, and 5). However, the main contribution of the present research lies in our testing of a novel moderator of this negative association between conflict and relationship quality—perceived understanding. And indeed, when we accounted for differences in perceived understanding, we found evidence for its beneficial role as a buffer against the deleterious effects of conflict for relationship satisfaction. Our findings thus join the small body of research suggesting that although conflict may often be detrimental for relationships, it does not have to be.

One question that arises in suggesting that perceived understanding buffers against reduced relationship satisfaction postconflict is whether relationship satisfaction is worse after conflicts in which one feels understood as compared to the absence of any conflict at all. Several of our studies can address this question. In particular, we can compare satisfaction postconflict to satisfaction after a neutral interaction (i.e., running errands together; Study 2),

on days without conflict (Study 4), or when first arriving in the laboratory (Study 5). Across these studies, we found that participants were no less satisfied with their relationships after recalling or experiencing a conflict in which they felt understood compared to if they had had no conflict at all. In fact, when Study 5's couples engaged in a conflict conversation, those who felt more understood were even more satisfied after the conflict than when they first arrived in the laboratory. Finally, Study 1 can also speak to this question—insofar as we showed in this study that relationships characterized by more frequent and severe conflict were not any less satisfying than relationships characterized by little conflict among people who felt more understood by their partners. We hasten to acknowledge that we did not assess aggressive, physical conflict which may function quite differently than other types of conflict. Regardless, our findings clearly challenge any broad characterization of conflict as necessarily harmful for relationship quality.

### Putting the “Perceived” in Understanding During Conflict

Prior work on conflict in couples has often focused on the observable behaviors that partners engage in during conflict, highlighting the different ways in which distressed and nondistressed couples interact during conflict. However, to have a more complete picture of the role of conflict in close relationships, it is also important to consider the cognitions and motivations that operate during conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999). In line with this view, our findings suggest that cognitions about understanding matter quite a bit during conflict, shedding new light on how understanding during conflict impacts relationship outcomes.

Although we think it is important to independently consider cognitions and motivations as well as behaviors in the context of conflict, we do not expect cognitions to exist in isolation from behaviors. Rather, we anticipate that beneficial cognitions, such as perceived understanding, are likely to prompt more positive, constructive relationship behaviors. Research suggests that people are more likely to respond constructively to relationship problems when they feel secure and validated by their relationship partners (Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). In the present research, we found that perceiving a partner as understanding during times of conflict helps people feel cared about and secure in their relationships. Perhaps, then, the feelings of partner caring and security that arise from perceived understanding may encourage people to try to be understanding themselves, rather than responding to their partner with hostility and anger, thereby avoiding the kind of conflict-induced downward spirals often seen among distressed couples (Gottman, 1994; Gottman et al., 1998). Some evidence for this idea was present in Study 5, the laboratory study, in which we found that people were uniquely buffered against reduced satisfaction when their *partners* reported feeling more understood. For individuals' perceived understanding to influence the satisfaction of their partners, it is likely that individuals who feel more understood are engaging in more positive, constructive behaviors that are perceived by their partners. If this is the case, perceived understanding is likely playing a powerful role in shaping the trajectory of conflict for both partners.

On a broader level, we believe it is worth considering the intriguing possibility that perceived understanding lies at the heart

of various extant findings in the conflict literature. For example, in Study 5 we found that participants who felt more understood were engaged in conflicts that were characterized by a higher ratio of positive to negative affect, but that it was perceived understanding and not observed affect that predicted relationship satisfaction postconflict. Perhaps, then, more positive conversations are beneficial because they promote perceived understanding between partners. Moreover, as suggested above, people who feel more understood may be more inclined to engage in the constructive behaviors previously found to be beneficial during conflict, such as affection, humor, or effective problem-solving. Likewise, negative behaviors such as hostility and aggression may be harmful precisely because they prevent partners from feeling understood. As a final example, perceived understanding might even play a role during those angry exchanges between partners which have been shown to be beneficial for relationships over time (e.g., Overall et al., 2009). In this prior work, anger during problem-solving discussions about severe problems predicted changes in behavior over time. To speculate, perhaps finally expressing one's anger and seeing one's partner respond by changing his or her behavior helps people feel that they are getting through to their partners—in other words, that their partners finally “get” them. The behavior change might also help people feel that their partner cares and is invested enough in the relationship to make the change, which was one of the most frequent reasons participants gave for why feeling understood was beneficial. Future research should explore these and other possible ways in which perceived understanding may illuminate existing findings in the conflict literature.

### Expanding the Role of Perceived Understanding in Close Relationships

Extant research on perceived understanding indicates that, in general, feeling understood by a relationship partner is beneficial for relationship quality (e.g., Long, 1990; Long & Andrews, 1990; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). This work has primarily focused on documenting individual differences in perceived understanding—that is, the extent to which people typically feel understood by their partners. The current work conceptually advances this research by highlighting one particular way in which feeling understood benefits relationships—by buffering people from the negative association between conflict and relationship quality. The present studies also have methodological implications. Given the prior focus on individual differences in the perceived understanding literature, research designs have generally been correlational in nature. In the current work, we combined a correlational approach with several experiments, allowing us to document a causal role for perceived understanding that is consistent with the findings that emerged from our more naturalistic, correlational studies.

Across studies, we found that perceived understanding, but not self-reported understanding, consistently buffered against the negative association between conflict and relationship satisfaction. Prior work has tended to focus on the role of being understood during conflict (e.g., Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Gottman et al., 1998; Kilpatrick et al., 2002) without taking into account the role of feeling understood. Our work suggests that these two aspects of understanding are linked and both appear to play an important role during conflict, but at least in our research, it was feeling that one's thoughts, feelings, and point of view are understood during con-

flict that was consistently critical for one's own relationship satisfaction, and even influenced the satisfaction of one's partner (as shown in Study 5). Given these findings, it is possible that perceived understanding is actually responsible for some of the results in prior research attributed to self-reported understanding or empathic accuracy. Given this possibility, it is important for researchers to consider both sides of understanding and how they might uniquely influence relationship quality.

As we noted at the outset, another construct that is closely related to perceived understanding is perceived responsiveness. Responsiveness is a deliberately broad construct thought to capture many similar concepts in the relationships literature (Reis & Gable, 2015), including feelings of being understood. Unlike perceived understanding, perceived responsiveness has often been considered within specific relationship contexts, such as sharing good or bad news (Gable et al., 2006), expressing gratitude (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013), or providing support (Maisel & Gable, 2009). Notably, this work has primarily focused on interactions in which one partner discusses something external to the relationship, such as a success at work. To the best of our knowledge, no work has directly considered the role of perceived responsiveness in the context of a negative relationship event (i.e., conflict). Given the overlap between perceived responsiveness and perceived understanding, we believe our findings help extend this work into the realm of conflict. Perceived responsiveness findings show that when people disclose their thoughts and feelings to their partners, and feel that their partner understands and cares for them, these exchanges build connection and closeness between partners (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2005). Our findings suggest this is true even in the context of conflict—that is, when partners are able to express their point of view and feel heard and cared about by their partners, at worst these conflicts do not hurt the relationship and, perhaps, at best, they offer an opportunity for couples to build intimacy. Overall, in the same way that perceived responsiveness is a broad construct born in part out of the goal of aligning many of the disparate findings in the relationships literature (Reis et al., 2004), our findings uncovering the buffering effects of perceived understanding during conflict may offer a related pathway for integrating many existing findings in the conflict literature into the perceived responsiveness framework.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The use of diverse methods across our seven studies supports the generalizability of our effects. However, we focused on participants from college and community samples who were relatively satisfied in their relationships. We cannot speak to whether perceived understanding would provide the same benefits in a clinical sample of distressed couples. It stands to reason that members of more distressed couples would feel less understood overall, but when they do perceive their partners as understanding, it is possible that these cognitions would be as, if not more, beneficial in terms of buffering against declines in relationship quality. Perceived understanding may also play different roles during conflict in different types of relationships—for example, proximal versus long distance relationships or newer versus longer-term relationships. Our samples included people in a variety of relationship types, including both short-term relationships and longer-term married couples. Thus, we expect the basic pattern of results would

emerge across different types of relationships although the magnitude of the effect may differ. For example, perceived understanding during conflict may be particularly diagnostic of a partner's investment and one's feelings in the early stages of relationships when people are likely to be less sure of their own and their relationship partner's commitment (Murray et al., 2006). On the other hand, when people are highly committed to their relationships they may be more willing to overlook their partner's lack of understanding or justify it in some way so that it does not negatively impact their feelings about their relationships. It was beyond the scope of the present research to test these questions, but future research should examine whether perceived understanding plays the same buffering role across all relationships.

Another potential limitation is that in Study 1 we measured general perceptions of feeling understood by one's partner—akin to the individual differences typically examined in the perceived understanding literature—whereas in the rest of our studies, with the exception of the diary study (Study 4), we examined perceived understanding within the context of a particular conflict. Despite operationalizing perceived understanding in slightly different ways across studies, we found a consistent pattern of results. Thus, it seems reasonable to speculate that people who typically feel more understood by their partners are those who are likely to feel more understood during conflict.

On another note, given that we only examined short-term changes in satisfaction, we cannot say whether perceived understanding during conflict provides the same benefits further down the road. We believe these studies capture the types of experiences people have in their everyday lives, suggesting these experiences should affect relationship satisfaction across time. Supporting this notion, we did find in Study 1 that people who tended to feel more understood by their partners were buffered against the negative effects of conflict on their general relationship satisfaction. Still, future work is clearly needed to test the potential accumulation and/or stability of these effects over time.

We focused on the role of perceived understanding during conflict and its effect on postconflict satisfaction, but we also found evidence in line with prior work theorizing and showing that perceived understanding is negatively associated with conflict (Cahn, 1990; Gordon et al., 2013). That is, in Studies 1 and 4, people who felt more understood by their partners were less likely to experience conflict. This makes sense since misunderstandings often lead to conflict. In this way, it seems that perceived understanding may play an important role in influencing relationship satisfaction both before and during conflict. In other words, if partners feel understood by each other, there may be no need to fight in the first place, but when couples do find themselves in the midst of fighting, perceived understanding can help attenuate the negative effects of that conflict. Conflict may also influence perceived understanding in a negative manner, such that partners feel even less understood after conflicts that do not end well. More research is needed to tease apart these different associations between conflict and perceived understanding.

Finally, it is important to ask what leads people to feel understood by their partners. A partner's actual understanding likely plays a role, but perceptions are also influenced by other factors such as one's own beliefs and expectations. For example, people who are more insecurely attached may be less likely to feel understood by their partners relative to people who are less insecurely attached,

regardless of how understanding their partners actually are (Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015). On the other hand, people who see themselves as very understanding may perceive their partners as more understanding too, regardless of their partners' actual levels of understanding (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Beliefs and expectations can also be shaped by differences in upbringing or culture. For example, some research has found that Asian students feel less understood in their daily lives than White students (Oishi, Akimoto, Richards, & Suh, 2013). In addition, people who are able to better articulate their thoughts and feelings or are more expressive may make it easier for their partners to understand them, and thus, feel more understood. Clearly, an important direction for future research is to uncover the multitude of factors that can influence perceived understanding during conflict. In addition, the fact that perceived understanding may reflect more than just reality highlights the importance of having researchers and clinicians target perceptions as well as behaviors when they intervene in couple conflict.

## Concluding Comments

Substantial research suggests that conflict can have damaging effects on relationship health. In the present studies, we found perceiving that a romantic partner understands one's thoughts, feelings, and point of view buffered against the negative effects of conflict for relationship satisfaction in general, in daily life, as the result of experimental manipulations, and during a conflict conversation in the laboratory. These findings demonstrate the importance of investigating the role of perceived understanding in close relationships. When people feel understood by their partners, fighting may not signal or result in an unhappy relationship.

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