Interpersonal problems and relationship quality: An examination of gay and lesbian romantic couples

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the interplay between men and women's interpersonal problems, the interpersonal problems of their romantic partners, and the quality of relationships among same-sex couples. Participants and their partners (72 gay couples and 72 lesbian couples) completed assessments of their interpersonal problems and the overall quality of their romantic relationships. Using Actor-Partner Interdependence Models, it was found that participants who possessed high levels of global interpersonal problems or had romantic partners with high levels of global interpersonal problems experienced relationship discord. This was especially evident for vindictive men and women. Further, women who had romantic partners who possessed interpersonal problems related to being overly domineering were at increased risk for experiencing high levels of relationship discord.

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1. Introduction

For some, interpersonal relationships are a source of pleasure and rewards. However, for others, relating and getting along well with others is difficult and is often one of the most upsetting stressors they face on a daily basis (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). These individuals may find themselves consistently behaving in a manner that is either too aggressive or too passive. Such interpersonal problems (IPs) are often conceptualized as traits that may lead to personal distress and prevent a person from functioning appropriately in social relationships (Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 2000). Although much is known about the effect of IPs on the person who possesses these qualities, less is known about how such issues might affect this person's romantic partner or the quality of his or her relationship. Therefore, the current study examined the importance of men and women's IPs, the IPs of their romantic partners, and the quality of relationships among same-sex romantic couples.

1.1. Sexual orientation and romantic relationships

In the past few years, civil rights issues among gay and lesbian couples have taken center stage in the political sphere. Due to the relatively sparse research examining the factors that contribute to

adaptive, committed relationships among same-sex couples, lay persons, politicians, and policy makers often rely on stereotypes instead of research when discussing same-sex relationships. Such stereotypes typically assume that gay and lesbian relationships are "different" than heterosexual relationships (c.f., Family Research Council, 2010).

However, contrary to this belief, the research that is available that examines same-sex romantic couples has tended to find that these romantic relationships are extremely similar to heterosexual relationships across a wide range of variables. Same-sex couples and heterosexual couples report similar levels of affective expression, intimacy, conflict, relationship commitment, and overall satisfaction (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1998, 2001 2004). Research also suggests that various predictors of relationship satisfaction tend to be similar for both same-sex romantic couples and heterosexual couples. For example, both heterosexual and same-sex romantic dyads tend to report high levels of relationship quality and fewer arguments when both members are rated high on the trait of agreeableness (c.f., Heller, Watson, & Iles, 2004; Kurdek, 1997; Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010).

Although same-sex and opposite-sex relationships have been found to be similar to each other in many ways, research has found some differences between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples that might limit the generalizability of a single theory or model to all three groups (Kurdek, 2001). For example, because gay and lesbians obtain less social support from family members than heterosexual couples (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 2001; Kurdek

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& Schmitt, 1987) they often rely more heavily on their romantic relationships as a source for such support. Some research also suggests that gender roles are critical to understanding the dynamics of romantic relationships (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Huston, 2000). Even though there is variability across individuals, members of gay male couples can be conceptualized as having masculine socialization experiences, lesbian couples represent feminine socialization experiences, and members of heterosexual couples possess both masculine and feminine socialization experiences. If such gender socializations are important for understanding certain dynamics of romantic relationships, it is likely that gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (which are composed of different gender pairings) might differ in some ways from each other (Gottman et al., 1998; Huston, 2000).

Consistent with this idea, because women tend to be socialized to define themselves in terms of empathy, sensitivity, compassion, deference, and connectedness to others (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kurdek, 2001) it has been suggested that lesbian dyads tend to emphasize and value the importance of having equal power in a relationship and being treated as equals by their romantic partners more than other romantic couples (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kurdek, 2001, 2007; Markey & Markey, 2013a). In contrast, men tend to be socialized to define themselves in terms of their own autonomous achievements (Cross & Madson, 1997). Therefore, although most people value relationship equality, a "double-dose" of femininity makes it more probable that lesbian dyads place a greater value on relationship equality than other romantic dyads. This is evidenced by research demonstrating that lesbian women are more likely to share housework chores than other couples (Kurdek, 2007), and are more likely to report having "exactly equal" levels of power in their relationships, in comparison with gay couples (Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996).

In short, it is important to study gay and lesbian couples not only because they are important populations, but because it is crucial to understand how well models created almost exclusively using heterosexual participants generalize to these equally important groups. To this end, the current research examines the IPs of gay men and lesbian women and the IPs of their romantic partners to better understand factors that may contribute to relationship quality.

1.2. Using the interpersonal circumplex to examine IPs

One of the most popular conceptualizations of IPs employs an interpersonal circumplex model. Derived from interpersonal theory and researchers at the Kaiser Foundation (Freedman, Leary, Ossorio, & Coffey, 1951; Leary, 1957), interpersonal circumplex models have been used to describe the circular structure of various interpersonal variables, including traits, behaviors, values, and problems (Horowitz et al., 2000; Kiesler, Schmidt, & Wagner, 1997; Locke, 2000; Markey & Markey, 2009; Wiggins, 1995). The circumplex structure asserts that interpersonal problems (e.g., IPs) vary on a circular continuum and are orientated by the primary dimensions of agency (dominance versus submission) and communion (warmth versus hostility). Fig. 1 displays the circular ordering of the eight IPs presented by Horowitz and Vitkus (1986): domineering (i.e., too aggressive toward others), vindictive (i.e., wants to get revenge against others), cold (i.e., difficulty feeling close with others), socially avoidant (i.e., hard to socialize with others), nonassertive (i.e., finds it difficult to confront others), exploitable (i.e., taken advantage of by other people), nurturant (i.e., tries to please other people too much), and intrusive (i.e., has a hard time keeping things private; Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990; Horowitz et al., 2000).

The circumplex structure suggests that the eight IP octants arranged around the circle can be conceptualized as different
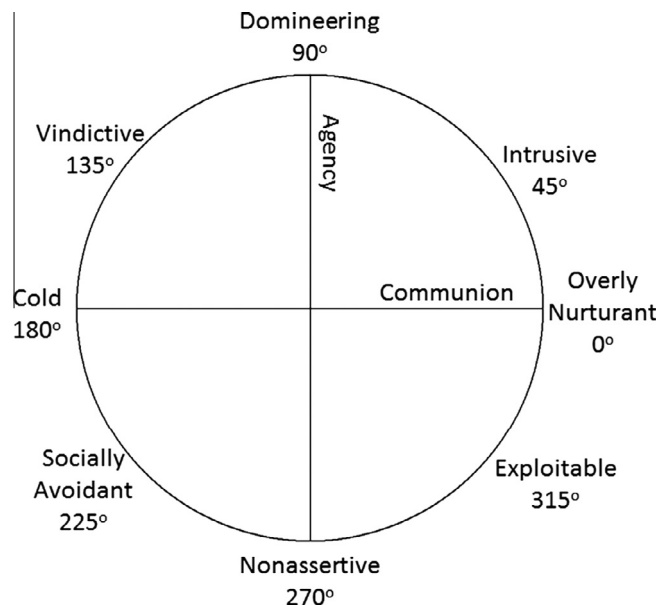

Fig. 1. The interpersonal problems circumplex.

"blends" of the two main axes: agency and communion. For example, "exploitable" is a blend of high communion and low agency (i.e., people with this IP try to please others too much while also being overly submissive), whereas "vindictive" is a blend of low communion and high agency (i.e., people with this IP are cold and distant while being overly controlling). Results from previous research have found that the circumplex model of IPs is best conceptualized as a bifactor model (Wilson, Revelle, Stroud, & Durbin, 2012). This bifactor model suggests that the covariance among the eight IP octant scales can be accounted for by a single general factor (i.e., Global IPs) and two specific factors represented by the two primary circumplex axes (i.e., agency and communion; see Wilson et al., 2012 for additional information). In other words, the IP circumplex can be used to assess three underlying dimensions: global IPs, agentic IPs, and communal IPs.

1.3. IPs and relationship quality

Global IPs, sometimes called "interpersonal distress" (Gurtman, 1992) or "general distress" (Vittengl, Clark, & Jarrett, 2003), represent the overall amount of IPs a person possesses. An individual with high levels of global IPs has many IPs, whereas a person with low levels of global IPs has few IPs. Past research suggests that individuals with high levels of global IPs tend to be neurotic, experience negative affect, and even report high levels of psychiatric symptom severity (Tracey, Rounds, & Gurtman, 1996; Vittengl et al., 2003; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Not surprisingly, these individuals are inclined to report poorer social adjustment with family, friends, and romantic partners (Gurtman, 1996; Horowitz et al., 2000; Vittengl et al., 2003). For example, Wilson et al. (2012) found that, among heterosexual couples, men and women who had high levels of global IPs tended to report feeling dissatisfied and lacked cohesion with their current romantic partners. Although global IPs have been linked to negative outcomes experienced in relationships, individuals who possess IPs specifically related to being high in agency and low in communion are at particular risk for being unsatisfied in their romantic relationships (Saffrey, Bartholomew, Scharfe, Henderson, & Koopman, 2003; Wilson et al., 2012). In other words, although increased global IPs are associated with poor relationship quality, being too controlling (i.e., possessing high agentic IPs) or cold and distant

(i.e., possessing low communal IPs) are especially predictive of experiencing unsatisfying romantic relationships.

Studies examining IPs in the context of dyadic relationships have tended to examine the IPs of a single member of a romantic dyad, and have rarely investigated the IPs and reports of relationship quality from *both* members of a romantic dyad. This is unfortunate because it limits the ability to examine how an individual's report of relationship quality might be influenced by the IPs of his or her romantic partner. Only two known studies have investigated the IPs from both members of a romantic dyad (Saffrey et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012), and both of these studies only examined heterosexual couples. These studies produced mixed results, with one finding a link between the global IPs of romantic partners and relationship quality as only important for women (Saffrey et al., 2003) and both finding that romantic partners (especially women) possessing agentic IPs tended to have mates who were unsatisfied with the relationship (Saffrey et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012). Both of these studies represent important first steps in understanding how the IPs of romantic partners might predict relationship quality, but their inconsistent findings and unknown generalizability to gay and lesbian couples reveal that more research is needed in this area. In order to fill this void, the current study will investigate the potential associations among gay men and lesbian women's IPs, their romantic partners' IPs, and their relationship quality.

1.4. Actor-partner interdependence models

Because the current study utilizes data from both partners of a romantic dyad who are indistinguishable from each other in terms of gender (i.e., both partners are either men or women) traditional statistical techniques are not appropriate. Therefore, Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2008) will be employed in order to account for the dependency in these data. APIMs are statistical methods that make it possible to examine how Person A's criterion variable simultaneously and independently relates to his or her own predictor variable as well as to his or her partner's (Person B's) predictor variable.

In the current con text, an APIM can be used to examine how relationship discord (i.e., low levels of relationship quality) is uniquely related to interpersonal variables that exist among romantic partners. First, the associations between Person A's global IPs, communal IPs, and agentic IPs and Person A's reported relationship discord can be esti mated. The APIM denotes these as 'actor effects' (see lines for "A" in Fig. 2). Second, the association between Person B's global IPs, communal IPs, and agentic IPs and Person A's report of relationship discord can be estimated. The APIM denotes these as 'partner effects' (see lines for "P" in Fig. 2). The APIM also makes it possible to examine gender as a possible moderator for all effects. For example, the interaction between gender and the actor effect of global IPs would assess whether or not the global IPs of gay men have a different association to their relationship discord than the global IPs of lesbian women.

2. Aims and predictions

2.1. Global IPs

(1) *Actor effect:* Consistent with previous research examining heterosexual couples (Gurtman, 1996; Horowitz et al., 2000; Vittengl et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012) it is expected that participants who have higher levels of global IPs will report greater levels of relationship discord than individuals with lower levels of global IPs (i.e., actor global IPs will be positively related to relationship discord).

(2) *Partner effect:* Given the mixed results concerning the importance of romantic partners' IPs (Saffrey et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012), no specific predictions were made concerning the link between participants' relationship discord and the global IPs of their romantic partners.

(3) *Gender interaction:* The analyses examining the interactions with gender (e.g., the interaction between gender and the partner effect) will be computed in order to understand whether or not the above findings generalize to both gay and lesbian individuals. These analyses were exploratory and no specific predictions were made.
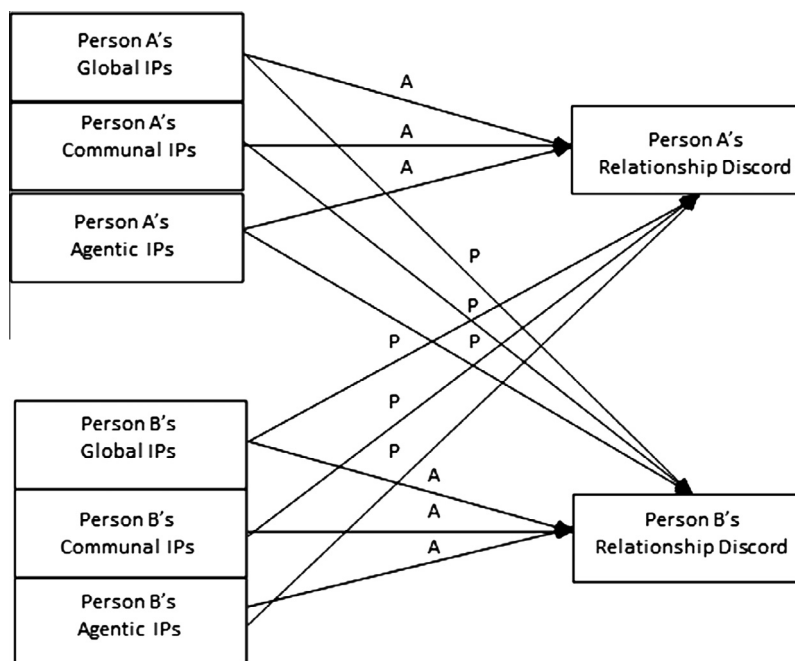

Fig. 2. Actor-partner interdependence model predicting relationship discord. *Note:* Lines with 'A's denote actor effects and lines with 'P's represent partner effects.

2.2. Agentic and communal IPs

(1) *Actor effect:* As with past research examining heterosexual couples (Saffrey et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2012), it is expected that participants who have high agentic and low communal IPs will report greater relationship discord than other individuals (i.e., actor agentic IPs will be positively related to relationship discord, and actor communal IPs will be negatively related to relationship discord).

(2) *Partner effect:* No specific predictions were made concerning the unique associations between participants' relationship discord and the agentic and communal IP problems of their romantic partners.

(3) The analyses examining the interactions with gender will be computed in order to determine whether or not the above findings generalize to both gay and lesbian individuals. Given the unique importance of equality and shared power within lesbian dyads (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kurdek, 2001, 2007; Markey & Markey, 2013a), it is expected that lesbian women will experience a significantly greater increase in relationship discord when their partners possess agentic IPs than will gay men when their partners possess agentic IPs. In other words, it is predicted that gender will moderate the partner effect for agentic IPs.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and eighty-eight participants (72 gay couples and 72 lesbian couples; *M* age = 33.74 years, *SD* = 11.27) participated in the present study as part of a larger research program examining associations between romantic relationships and health among same-sex romantic couples. Seventy percent of the sample was European-American, 14% was African American, 10% was Hispanic, 3% was Asian, and 3% was of an 'other' ethnic back ground. All couples were required to have maintained an exclu sive monogamous relationship for at least six months. The majority of the couples in our sample were cohabitating (76%) and couples had been roman-tically involved for 5.55 years on aver age (*SD* = 7.75 years).

Participants were recruited from a northeastern university cam-pus and the surrounding area by advertising in diverse periodicals and through local health and advocacy groups located in nearby urban areas. These couples were participants in a larger study examining predictors of relationship quality and health. Previous studies have focused on the lesbian dyads in this data set (c.f., Markey & Markey, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) and the current study represents the first time the gay couples in this data set were examined. Participants were placed in separate rooms in the researchers' laboratory while they completed the measures used in this study.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Interpersonal problems

Participants' IPs were assessed using the Inventory of Interper-sonal Problems – Short Form Circumplex (IIP-SC; Hopwood, Pincus, DeMoor, & Koonce, 2008; Soldz, Budman, Demby, & Merry, 1995). The IIP-SC is a 32-item version of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP; Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno, & Villasenor, 1988) designed to assess the eight octants of the interpersonal cir-cumplex. The IIP-SC consists of statements that describe difficulties with relating to others (e.g., "I try to control other people too much," "It is hard for me to show affection to people"), and these statements are rated using a five-point response format labeled

"0 = not at all," "1 = somewhat," "2 = moderately," "3 = very," and "4 = extremely." The reliability of the octant scales ranged from $\alpha = .70$ to .80. Participants' octant scales were averaged to assess global IPs. Additionally, as is common practice with circumplex models, the octant scales of the IIP-SC were combined in order to compute participants' dimensional scores for communal IPs and agentic IPs. To do this, each standardized octant score was weighted (multiplied) by the cosine (to obtain the communal IPs) or sine (to obtain the agentic IPs) of a given octant's angular loca-tion (θ) on the circumplex. The resulting components were then summed to yield communal and agentic IP scores, using the geo-metic formulas (Wiggins, 1995):

Agentic IPs = $(.3) \Sigma Zi \sin \theta i$.
Communal IPs = $(.3) \Sigma Zi \cos \theta i$.

where .30 is a scaling factor, Zi represents the standardized score of the ith octant and θi is the angle of the ith octant seen in Fig. 1 (e.g., 0°, 45°, 90°, etc.; see Gurtman, 2011 for additional information).

3.2.2. Relationship discord

To assess the amount of relationship discord (i.e., low levels of relationship quality) experienced by individuals, participants sepa-rately completed the 15 items of the Marital Interaction Scale (MIS; Braiker & Kelley, 1979) that were designed to assess conflict (e.g., 'How often do you and your partner argue with one another?') and love (which was reverse coded; e.g., 'How close do you feel toward your partner?'). Because the MIS was originally designed to assess married couples' relationship discord, the measure was revised to read either "significant other" or "partner" instead of "spouse." A high score indicates that a participant reported their romantic relationship to be conflict-ridden with little love, whereas a low score indicates that a participant reported their relationship as harmonious and loving. The reliability of the MIS was $\alpha = .84$, and there was a moderate level of agreement between romantic partners' reports of relationship discord (pairwise intra-class $r\,(142) = .44\ p < .01$).

3.3. Analysis strategy

Multilevel modeling was first used to test an APIM predicting relationship discord from the level-2 variable gender (coded $-.5$ = female dyad; $.5$ = male dyad) and the level-1 variables: actor effect for global IP, partner effect for global IP, actor effect for com-munal IPs, actor effect for agentic IPs, partner effect for communal IPs, and partner effect for agentic IPs. This model simultaneously tests the unique contributions of gender, actor IPs, and partner IPs when predicting relationship discord. A second APIM analysis was then conducted in order to examine whether or not gender moderated these actor and partner effects. In this new model, the cross-level interaction between gender and each of the actor and partner effects were examined[1].

4. Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correla-tions among the primary variables examined in the current study. Gay (*M* = 41.66) and lesbian (*M* = 41.21) dyads did not differ from each other in terms of their overall relationship discord ($t(141) = .32$, $p = .74$; $r = .03$). As expected, the three assessments of interpersonal problems (global IPs, agentic IPs, and communal

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[1] At the suggestion of a reviewer actor x partner interactions were examined for global, communal, and agentic IPs. None of these interactions significantly predicted relationship distress and were not included in the final analyses.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among main study variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Relationship discord	41.48	11.50	–			
2. Global IP	1.06	.51	.35**	–		
3. Communal IP	.00	.56	−.19*	−.11	–	
4. Agentic IP	.00	.62	.16*	−01	−.09	–

Note: n individuals = 288.
* *p* < .05.
** *p* < .01.

IPs) were related to relationship distress. Additionally, as expected, given the structure of the interpersonal circumplex, the three assessments of interpersonal problems were not significantly related to each other. However, due to the dependency in the data, these correlations need to be interpreted with caution. In order to more accurately assess the link between interpersonal problems and relationship distress and examine partner effects, APIMs were employed.

4.1. Global IPs

In the following analyses, the results obtained were similar regardless of the age or length of participants' relationship; thus, to simplify the findings, these variables were excluded from the reported analyses. Table 2 displays the resulting APIM effects when predicting relationship discord. Effect size estimates were obtained by converting the t-values from the significant tests into partial correlation coefficients, using the formula $pr = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + df)}$ (Carlson & Furr, 2009; Kashdan & Steger, 2006; Markey & Markey, 2013a). Both the actor effect (pr = .45) and partner effect (pr = .19) for global IPs were positively related to relationship discord. It appears that individuals who possessed many global IPs tended to experience greater amounts of relationship discord than those with few global IPs. In a similar manner, individuals who were romantically involved with a partner who had many global IPs were more likely to experience high levels of relationship discord than those who were romantically involved with a partner who had few global IPs. Gender did not moderate either the actor or partner effect of global IPs, suggesting that the actor and partner effects found earlier are similar for gay and lesbian participants (see Table 2).

4.2. Agentic and communal IPs

As can be seen in Table 2, the actor effects for communal (pr = −.21) and agentic IPs (pr = .26) were associated with

Table 2
Summary of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Models Predicting Relationship Discord.

	Estimate	SE	t	Effect size (pr)
Gender (G)	.39	1.37	.29	.02
Actor Global IP (AG)	7.88	1.29	6.09**	.45
Partner Global IP (PG)	3.01	1.33	2.26*	.19
Actor Communal IP (AC)	−2.82	1.12	−2.51*	−.21
Actor Agentic IP (AA)	2.86	.89	3.19*	.26
Partner Communal IP (PC)	−1.06	1.03	−1.03	−.08
Partner Agentic IP (PA)	.61	.96	.64	.05
G × AG	−1.35	2.44	−.55	−.05
G × PG	−4.64	2.47	−1.88	−.15
G × AC	.25	2.18	.12	.01
G × AA	−1.39	1.80	−.77	−.06
G × PC	−.98	2.03	−.38	.03
G × PA	−4.50	1.91	−2.31*	.20

Note: n dyads = 144; *n* individuals = 288.
* *p* < .05.
** *p* < .01.

relationship discord. It appears that individuals who were cold and overly dominating experienced high levels of relationship discord. Because gender did not moderate either of these effects, these results are similar for both lesbian women and gay men. The effect sizes yielded for the actor effects for communal and agentic were then used to compute the exact angular location of IPs most related to relationship discord using the geometric formula angular location = arctan ($pr_{\text{agentic IP}}/pr_{\text{communal IP}}$) (Wiggins & Broughton, 1991; Wright, Pincus, Conroy, & Hilsenroth, 2009). Applying this formula to the obtained actor effects indicates that the IP most related to high levels of relationship distress tended to be located at 128° or within the vindictive octant (see Fig. 1).

In contrast to the actor effect for communal IPs, the null result for the partner effect suggests that an individual's romantic partner's communal IPs were not uniquely related to a person's own sense of relationship discord (pr = −.08). However, as expected, partners' agentic IPs were moderated by gender suggesting that the relation between romantic partner's agentic IPs and relationship discord is different for lesbian women and gay men. In order to understand this interaction, Fig. 3 presents a graphical representation derived by calculating simple regression equations for lesbian women and gay men corresponding to individuals whose romantic partners had agentic IPs 1 standard deviation above the mean and 1 standard deviation below (Aiken & West, 1991). As seen in Fig. 3, significance tests of the simple slopes revealed that romantic partners' agentic IPs were unrelated to gay men's relationship discord (pr = −.04). However, consistent with past research suggesting the importance lesbian women attribute to equality, women in romantic relationships with a partner who possessed many agentic IPs (i.e., was too controlling, domineering, etc.) tended to report higher relationship discord than women in a relationship with a partner who had fewer agentic IPs (pr = .20). As before, by applying a geometric formula (see Wiggins & Broughton, 1991; Wright et al., 2009) to the effect sizes yielded from the partner effects for lesbian women, the location of interpersonal problems most related to the discord of romantic partners was computed to be 111° on the interpersonal circumplex (the Domineering octant; see Fig. 1).

5. Discussion

The majority of studies examining IPs have tended to focus on clinical interventions (c.f., Horowitz et al., 1988; Ruiz et al., 2004) and personality disorders (c.f., Pilkonis, Kim, Proietti, & Barkham, 1996; Pincus & Wiggins, 1990), with relatively few studies examining IPs as predictors of important outcomes in interpersonal relationships. The current research examined the IPs of individuals and their same-sex romantic partners in order to predict relationship quality. This represents one of the few occasions where the IPs of both members of a romantic dyad have been examined, and is the first time IPs have been examined among same-sex couples. By examining both members of gay and lesbian romantic dyads, it was possible to investigate the unique importance of an individual's own IPs and his or her romantic partner's IPs when predicting relationship quality.

5.1. Global IPs

Global IPs represent the overall quantity of IPs a person possesses and high global IPs have been linked to neuroticism, negative affect, and even psychiatric symptoms (Tracey et al., 1996; Vittengl et al., 2003; Watson et al., 1988). Researchers and theorists have found that individuals with high global IPs tend to have negative interactions with others and report poorer social adjustment with family, friends, and romantic partners
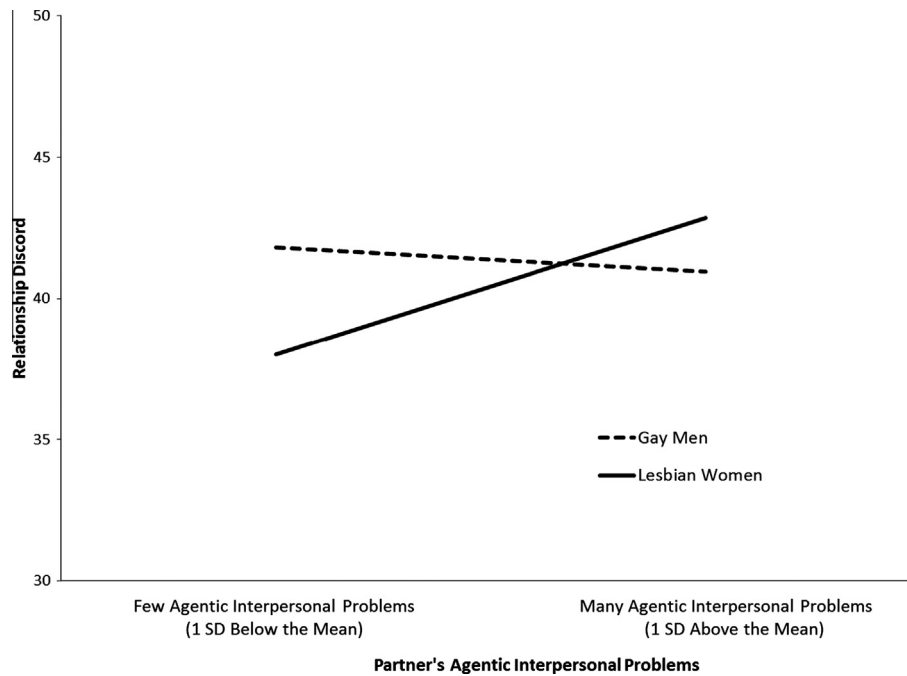
Fig. 3. Interaction between gender and romantic partners' agentic interpersonal problems when predicting relationship discord.

(Gurtman, 1996; Horowitz et al., 2000; Vittengl et al., 2003). Past research examining heterosexual couples has found that men and women with high levels of global interpersonal problems also tend to be dissatisfied in their current relationship (Wilson et al., 2012). Consistent with this research, we found that men and women in same-sex romantic relationships who had high levels of global IPs experienced high levels of relationship discord.

Just as a person's own level of global IPs were predictive of negative relationship quality, results from the current study indicated that participants who had a romantic partner with high levels of global IPs were also at risk of experiencing relationship discord. In other words, gay men and lesbian women in a romantic relationship with a partner who possessed many interpersonal problems tended to report distress in their romantic relationships. Such findings are dissimilar from past research examining heterosexual couples which found the partner effects for global IPs were either unrelated to relationship quality (Wilson et al., 2012) or were only important predictors for women (Saffrey et al., 2003). Although the current study cannot determine the exact reason for this difference, it is possible that members in same-sex relationships are more sensitive to their partner's global IPs than heterosexuals because such problems might have a greater effect on gays and lesbians who tend to be more dependent on their romantic relationships for social support than their heterosexual peers (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 2001; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987).

5.2. Agentic and communal IPs

Second, we examined whether or not specific types of IPs were uniquely problematic in the context of same-sex romantic relationships. We found that both gay men and lesbian women who possessed IPs (i.e., the actor effect) related to being too high in agency and low in communion were at particular risk for experiencing high levels of relationship discord (i.e., IPs related to the Vindictive octant on the interpersonal circumplex; see Fig. 1). In other words, individuals who were distrustful and did not care about the happiness of others (Alden et al., 1990) tended to report low levels of relationship quality. However, the IPs of romantic

partners (i.e., the partner effect) that were most detrimental to relationships were different for gay men and lesbian women. For gay men, the specific type of IP (i.e., agentic or communal) of their partner was not predictive of relationship quality. It seems that, for gay men, although global IPs are related to relationship discord, the exact type of IP is unimportant. For this population, the quantity of IPs, not the type of IP, appears to be the best predictor of relationship quality.

In contrast to gay men, the specific types of IPs possessed by the romantic partners of lesbian women were uniquely predictive of relationship quality. Lesbian women who had a romantic partner who possessed many agentic IPs (i.e., IPs related to the Domineering octant of the interpersonal circumplex) were at particular risk of experiencing discord within their relationships. This suggests that lesbian women involved in a romantic relationship with a partner who was overly controlling and assertive (Alden et al., 1990) tended to report low levels of relationship quality. This predicted finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that lesbian women tend to particularly value relationship equality and the sharing of power (Kurdek, 2001). It is possible that because lesbian women emphasize the importance of having equal power and being treated as equals, they find it particularly difficult to be in a relationship with a partner who is overbearing and controlling.

The findings concerning the agentic and communal IP of romantic partners share some similarities with previous research examining heterosexual couples. Similar to the findings concerning lesbian couples, past studies have found that heterosexuals, especially women, who have agentic IPs tend to have mates who are unsatisfied in their current relationship (Saffrey et al., 2003). Such results suggest that for both men and women it is more difficult to be in a relationship with a woman who possesses many agentic IPs than it is to be in a relationship with a man who possesses these problems. The reason for such difficulty might involve issues related to relationship equality (especially in lesbian relationships; Kurdek, 2001) or it might be related gender roles associated with agentic IPs. Individuals are often socialized to expect men to possess "masculine" attributes and characteristics, including being independent, aggressive, assertive, and dominant (Cross & Madson,

1997; Kurdek, 2001). Therefore, romantic partners might not find it as distressing when a male romantic partner exhibits IP related to agency (e.g., aggressive, controlling, argumentative, etc.) as when a female romantic partner expresses these same issues. Future research should explore the underlying reasons why women with high agentic IPs seem to be at particular risk of having partners who report relationship discord.

5.3. Limitations and conclusions

When interpreting the results of this study, it is important to take into account the limitations inherent in our methodology. This sample was fairly diverse in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic background, but was not necessarily representative of all same-sex romantic couples. Replication of these findings with larger samples of more diverse couples will strengthen our understanding of the role of interpersonal problems when predicting relationship quality. The current study relied on self-reports to assess the interpersonal problems of participants. Although past research has demonstrated that such self-reports are a reliable and valid means of assessing interpersonal problems, they may be susceptible to various response biases and errors (John & Robins, 1993). Future researchers might consider examining the generalizability of these results to other reports of interpersonal problems obtained from friends, peers, or family members. Due to the correlational nature of these data, it is not possible to know the causal directions of the findings. Although it is possible that interpersonal problems cause an individual to experience low relationship quality, it is also conceivable that poor relationship quality causes a person to perceive interpersonal problems. Longitudinal designs will allow for a better understanding of the potentially dynamic relation between interpersonal problems and relationship quality.

In conclusion, this research extends our understanding of the link between traits referred to as IPs and romantic relationship quality among gay and lesbian couples. Relationship research is particularly valuable when researchers can provide some understanding of factors that are likely to lead relationships to be rewarding or unsatisfying, or to succeed or fail. Personality research has provided indicators of successful relationships utilizing core personality dimensions (e.g., the FFM; McCrae & Costa, 2012); however, an examination of personality characteristics that fall at the extremes or are indicative of IPs has received considerably less empirical attention in relationship research. And yet, many people will embark –knowingly or unknowingly – on a relationship with an individual who is a pushover, is vindictive, or who manifests controlling tendencies. It is intuitive to conclude that these relationships may not prove successful, but little data has been available to confirm this hypothesis. Our findings not only provide support for this notion, but they also highlight the specific types of IPs that tend to be most problematic among same-sex couples.

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