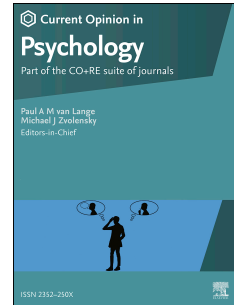


# Journal Pre-proof

Feeling understood and appreciated in relationships: Where do these perceptions come from and why do they matter?

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RUNNING HEAD: Understood and appreciated

**Feeling understood and appreciated in relationships:  
Where do these perceptions come from and why do they matter?**

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**Abstract**

Perceptions of romantic partners (even inaccurate perceptions) are important determinants of initial liking and long-term relationship satisfaction. In the current article, we consider the role of perceptions in romantic relationships through the lens of felt understanding and appreciation. We first examine where perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated come from, considering partner, self, and dyadic influences. We then examine how feeling understood and appreciated shape relationship quality, focusing on these perceptions as buffers of negative relationship experiences and mechanisms through which couples can create positive upward cycles of responsiveness and appreciation. Finally, we theorize about the unique *dyadic* experience of feeling understood and appreciated, positing that moments of mutual understanding and appreciation play a critical role in increasing social connection.

Word count: 120 words

## **Feeling understood and appreciated in relationships: Where these perceptions come from and why they matter**

In romantic relationships, people's perceptions of their partner (even inaccurate perceptions) are important determinants of initial liking and long-term relationship satisfaction [1,2]. For example, it is more important for people to perceive their romantic partners as responsive than it is for their partner to actually be responsive [3]. Likewise, feeling understood by one's partner can be a stronger predictor of relationship quality than the partner's actual knowledge [4–6].

In the current article, we consider the role of perceptions in romantic relationships through the lens of felt understanding and appreciation, two foundational building blocks of responsiveness, intimacy, connection, and relationship quality [3,7]. We first examine where perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated come from. We then examine how feeling understood and appreciated shape relationship quality. Finally, we theorize about the unique *dyadic* experience of feeling understood and appreciated. Overall, we aim to bring together the latest literature to form a comprehensive understanding of the importance of feeling understood and appreciated and the role these perceptions play in the maintenance of high-quality relationships.

### **Where do perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated come from?**

People's feelings of being understood and appreciated by their romantic partners come from many sources, including one's partner, oneself, and shared dyadic experiences. These perceptions may be driven by how partners act and perceive one another *generally* as well as their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions in *specific moments* together [7].

#### *Partner influences*

In general, people feel appreciated by partners who are responsive and engage in relationship maintenance behaviors [8], such as those who attempt to resolve conflict or encourage their partners to share their feelings [9]. People are also likely to feel appreciated by partners who are attentive to their behaviors, such as those who are active listeners [10] and who perceive and acknowledge a sacrifice [11,12]. People may also feel more understood by partners who are more similar to them [13,14]. During specific social interactions, people are more likely to feel understood and appreciated by partners who have thoughtful, detailed responses [5] or who are highly expressive [15]. Specific listening behaviors may also play an important role in fostering felt understanding and appreciation. Recent theorizing about listening and responsiveness suggests that partners can demonstrate their attention and comprehension during conversations by engaging in behaviors such as asking follow-up questions, validating the speaker, maintaining eye contact, and nodding [16]. In turn, these responsive listening behaviors likely promote feelings of being understood and appreciated.

### *Self influences*

Although felt understanding and appreciation reflect people's perceptions of how their partner feels about them, a large part of feeling understood and appreciated likely stems from people's own behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. For example, people can behave in ways that promote understanding and appreciation in their partner through reciprocity, such as being more responsive, appreciative, and understanding themselves, which is likely to prompt their partner to be responsive, appreciative, and understanding in turn [8]. People may also feel understood and appreciated during conversations with their partner if they are non-defensive [17]. Of course, feeling understood and appreciated may also reduce defensiveness [18,19].

People's beliefs about themselves also shape their perceptions through projection. Indeed, there is evidence that people project their own levels of responsiveness onto their partners [20]. Thus, it is likely that the extent to which people feel understood and appreciated is influenced by how understanding and appreciative they view themselves to be. People's perceptions can also be influenced by other feelings and experiences: individuals who are more satisfied in their relationships tend to assume they are understood, even during conflict [21,22]. In addition, people who are more depressed tend to perceive their partners as less able to understand their thoughts and feelings [23], though this does not appear to be entirely due to motivated cognition—there is evidence their partners actually are less understanding.

Motivation to be understood and appreciated also matters, as it affects how people think, feel, and behave. People often want to feel understood, especially when their self-views are important to them [24] and culturally valued [25]. People who are motivated to be understood and appreciated by their partners may be more likely to engage in behaviors that promote their partner's understanding and appreciation, such as openly communicating their feelings and beliefs to their partner or doing a kind gesture. However, motivation may also bias one's perceptions. People who want to feel understood and appreciated by their partners, such as those who have a strong desire to feel accepted for who they are [19], may arrive at the desired conclusion that they are understood and appreciated even in the absence of any confirmatory evidence [5].

#### *Dyadic influences*

Importantly, felt understanding and appreciation are dyadic processes and thus are shaped by shared experiences. Ample research demonstrates that romantic partners synchronize in various ways, including in their thoughts (e.g., generalized shared reality) [26] and emotions (e.g.,

positivity resonance and co-experienced affect) [27,28]. However, the literature on synchrony is predominantly separate from the literature on responsiveness, understanding, and appreciation [29]. We argue that synchronous moments—moments in which partners converge in their thoughts and emotions—represent reciprocal understanding between partners. In moments of synchrony, *both* partners are likely to feel understood and appreciated due to a shared understanding of how each person—and the world—works. Other synchronous processes such as physiological and neural synchrony may also implicitly enhance understanding (and thus feeling understood). Because thoughts and feelings are often embodied [30], physiological synchrony and nonverbal mimicry may help people better understand how their partner is thinking and feeling. For example, if both partners have elevated blood pressure and heart rates during an interaction together and are sharing expressions of stress, these shared experiences may make it easier for them to understand each other. Of course, feeling understood and appreciated may promote enhanced synchrony, as well. In one study, couples had greater cortisol synchrony when they reported feeling understood and appreciated by their partner in the past several hours [31].

### **How do perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated shape relationship quality?**

Researchers are increasingly providing evidence that perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated play an important role in shaping the quality of relationships. Two key ways in which these perceptions appear to play a role are through their ability to act as (1) buffers during negative relationship experiences and (2) mechanisms to promote cycles of responsiveness and appreciation.

#### *Feeling understood and appreciated as buffers during negative relationship experiences*

Perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated may act as buffers because they help

promote positive sentiment override, in which people view their partner and their relationship through a positive lens [32]. If people feel that their partner understands and appreciates them, this feeling of being known and valued may help people have a more positive view of their partner and consequently encourage them to engage in more prosocial behaviors during negative relationship experiences, such as giving their partner the benefit of the doubt and responding more positively to partner transgressions. People may also be more likely to disclose their own difficult feelings and experiences with their partner when they feel understood and appreciated. In one study of adolescents and parents, adolescents anticipated greater well-being—and a greater intention to self-disclose in the future—when imagining disclosing a transgression and feelings of hurt to a parent who listened well [33]. Feeling understood and appreciated may also help people be more open to listening to partners who challenge them to think differently (e.g., to reappraise a problem) [34]. In line with this theorizing, people who feel more understood [35] and appreciated [36,37] by their partners tend to maintain higher levels of relationship quality in the face of relationship conflict compared to those who feel less understood and appreciated. In fact, in one laboratory study, people who felt more understood during a conflict conversation with their partner actually felt *more* satisfied after the conversation than when they first arrived in the lab [35]. Feeling appreciated has also been shown to buffer against the negative effects of other relationship stressors, such as financial strain [37] and unequal division of labor [38].

Feeling understood and appreciated may also act as a buffer for relationship insecurities. Expressions of gratitude from a partner have been shown to help buffer against the negative effects of attachment insecurities, particularly attachment avoidance [39]. Critically, it is people's *perceptions* of their partner's gratitude expressions that drive these effects. One reason why these



perceptions may be buffering is because they increase one's sense of security within the relationship [40]. In one longitudinal study, people were less anxiously attached in the moment and over the following year when they perceived more gratitude from their partners [41].

### ***Perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated as mechanisms to promote cycles of responsiveness and appreciation***

Gordon and colleagues [8] posited, and found evidence for, a positive cycle in which feeling appreciated by a partner promotes appreciation for one's partner—after all, a partner who values you (and engages in behaviors that convey this) is a partner worth appreciating. In turn, this appreciation was shown to prompt relationship maintenance behaviors that help people hold onto their relationships, such as being thoughtful and responsive in daily life (see also [42]). Completing the cycle, people felt more appreciated by partners who engage in these relationship maintenance behaviors. In this way, felt understanding and appreciation may help catalyze positive cycles of responsive behaviors and appreciation (see Figure 1). For example, when people expect to be understood during a conflict conversation with their partner, they engage in more positive communication behavior [22].

### **Dyadic experience of feeling understood and appreciated**

Although research has predominantly focused on individual experiences of feeling understood and appreciated in relationships, these perceptions are inherently dyadic. Earlier we proposed that moments of synchrony—that is, shared thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and physiological responses—may promote feeling understood and appreciated. In this final section, we further consider the role of these shared moments, proposing that dyadic experiences in which both partners simultaneously convey understanding and appreciation *to* their partner and feel

understood and appreciated *by* their partner may play an especially important role in relationship formation and maintenance, serving as a social glue that brings and keeps partners together.

Empirical research has demonstrated a clear link between shared thoughts and emotions and interpersonal closeness. Generalized shared reality (i.e., sharing a set of feelings, beliefs, or concerns with another person about the world in general) is a key predictor of initial connection and ongoing relationship satisfaction [26]. The link between shared thoughts and connection has also been found on the neural level: friends show similar neural responses when viewing audiovisual movies [43] and couples who synchronize their neural responses when viewing movies about married life tend to have greater marital satisfaction [44]. Similarly, shared emotional responses, such as feeling positive at the same time or laughing together, foster social connection [45] and are an integral component of high-quality relationships [28,46].

We propose that mutual understanding and appreciation is a key mechanism linking shared thoughts and emotions to high-quality social connection. That is, shared thoughts and emotions may be especially important in facilitating and maintaining social bonds precisely *because* of a mutual sense of understanding and appreciation. When two people say the same thought at the same time or laugh at the same joke, each person not only expresses their understanding of the other person (i.e., “I see that you think this is funny”) but also expresses their agreement (i.e., “I, too, think this is funny”), signaling their similarity. These shared experiences may also signal good listening, as it means that each person has heard and understood what the other person is saying. Consequently, both partners may feel that the other person “gets” them and that they are on the same wavelength or in sync, which are common lay accounts of high-quality connection [26].

Research on the dyadic experience of feeling understood and appreciated is an important avenue for future research. There is some evidence that people are most satisfied in their relationships when both partners are grateful [47] and the dyadic model of gratitude suggests that one appreciative partner should promote appreciation in the other partner, creating more moments of shared appreciation and understanding [8,48]. But many questions related to the experience of mutual understanding and appreciation—specifically at the momentary level—remain unanswered. For example, work is needed to examine whether mutual understanding and appreciation are key features of feeling in sync and connected to one’s partner—both within specific conversations and over time. Investigating the psychological and physiological signatures of mutual understanding and appreciation is another fruitful area for future work, as is delineating the specific factors that promote versus hinder mutual understanding and appreciation.

### **Other Avenues for Future Research**

We have focused broadly on feeling understood and appreciated as two important components of perceived responsiveness, intimacy, and connection. We find in our own work that feeling understood and feeling appreciated are highly correlated within and between individuals and expect that they share many antecedents and consequences. For example, having a partner who is a good listener would likely heighten one’s felt understanding and good listening might also indicate a partner who is caring and appreciative, as they are willing to take the time to listen well. Although these two perceptions often co-occur, there may also be times when people feel understood but not appreciated (“my partner sees me clearly but doesn’t value what they see”) or appreciated but not understood (“my partner values me but what they value isn’t the real me”).

Thus, research is needed to identify shared and unique roles of feeling understood and feeling appreciated.

While we have focused here on the importance of feeling understood and appreciated, other work has focused on *being* understanding and appreciative. Integrating these two literatures, one interesting avenue for future research is exploring when a person's actual understanding and appreciation leads their partner to feel understood and appreciated, and when it does not. For example, are signals of understanding and appreciation less likely to be perceived by a partner when they are tired, sick, or overwhelmed?

Finally, although we have focused on perceived understanding and appreciation in the context of romantic relationships, we anticipate that feeling understood and appreciated would operate similarly in other types of relationships, such as parent-child relationships or relationships in the workplace. Indeed, research on listening in the workplace has similarly found evidence of dyadic effects of listening between team members [49].

## **Conclusion**

Existing research suggests that gratitude helps us find and bond to responsive partners and form moments of high-quality connection [42]. We suggest that the other side of that emotion—the *perception* of being appreciated—along with the perception of being understood, are additional important components of connection. Moments in which both partners feel understood and appreciated could play a crucial role throughout relationships, buffering against negative relationship experiences and promoting cycles of responsiveness and appreciation that bond partners to each other long-term.

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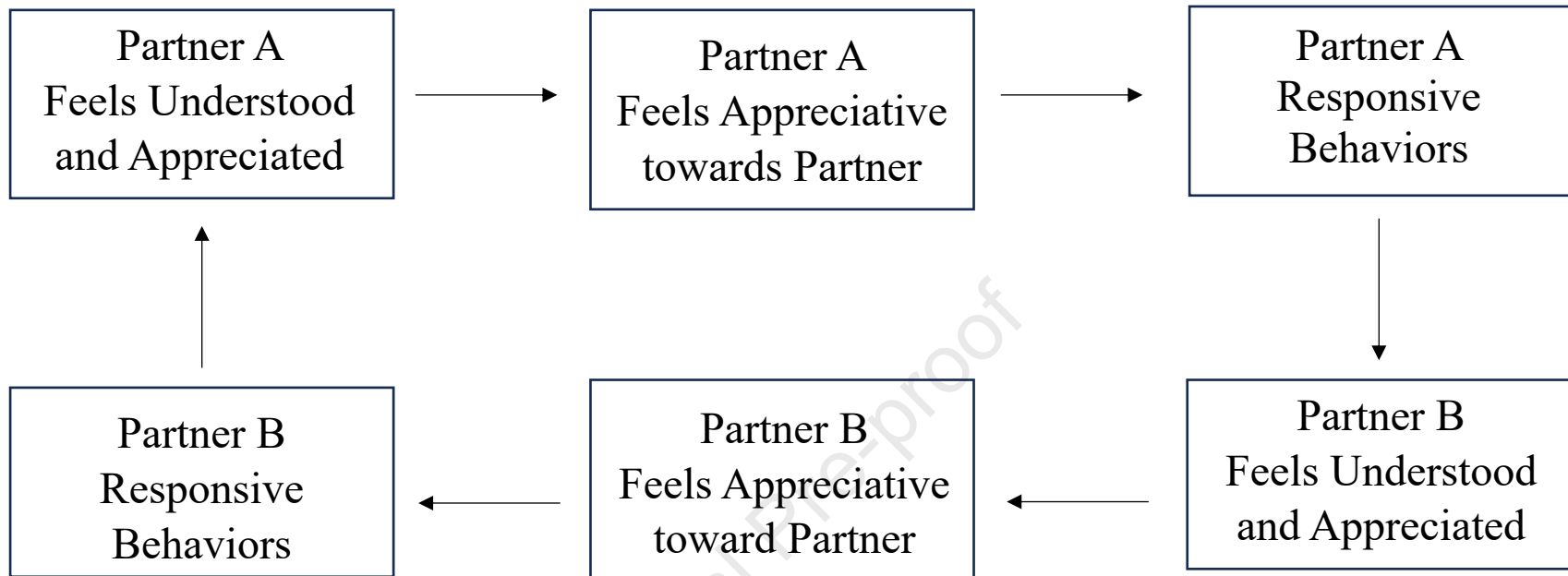


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**Figure 1.** Perceptions of feeling understood and appreciated may help catalyze positive cycles of responsive behaviors, appreciation, and understanding

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### Highlights

- Feeling understood and appreciated stem from self, partner and dyadic experiences
- These perceptions buffer against negative experiences and promote positive cycles
- Mutual understanding and appreciation may be especially important in relationships
- Research should identify shared and unique roles of understanding and appreciation

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