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Toward understanding understanding: The importance of feeling understood in relationships

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Abstract

People want to be understood by others, yet their perceptions of being understood are only modestly related to actually being understood by others. In this article, we provide an integrative theoretical model and review of research on the processes that contribute to feeling understood and misunderstood by others. The model highlights situational, dispositional, and relational factors that influence feeling understood and underscores the importance of feeling understood for relationship and personal well-being. We also clarify definitional and measurement issues that have impeded progress in prior research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"I'm just a soul whose intentions are good

Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood"

Lyrics by Sol Marcus, Bennie Benjamin, and Gloria Caldwell.

People want to be understood. By this, we mean that people want others to comprehend as they themselves do their needs, abilities, traits, wishes, beliefs, and preferences. When people feel understood by another person, they believe that this person "gets them" in some fundamental way, and they tend to feel psychologically connected to this person, are better able to coordinate activities with him or her, and are more likely to respond to his or her influence attempts. On the other hand, when people feel misunderstood, they are more likely to feel alienated and tend to resist attempts to act interdependently with or be influenced by those who misunderstand them. From a motivational standpoint, efforts to be understood by others or to modify or avoid misunderstanding when it occurs are a central goal in interpersonal relations.

The impact of understanding and misunderstanding spans diverse relationships. In intimate relationships, feeling misunderstood is often at the heart of conflictual interaction and nonconstructive communication (Weger, 2005), as it also is in other dyad types, such as between teachers and their students (Verschuere, 2015). In health care, patients who feel that providers understand their symptoms and needs are more likely to comply with treatments than patients who feel misunderstood (Street, Makoul, Arora, & Epstein, 2009). Likewise, patients' sense of being understood is an

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important element of successful psychotherapeutic alliances (Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011; Pocock, 1997). In organizations, a manager's ability to convey understanding contributes to a beneficial organizational climate (Johnson & Indvik, 1999). People are more likely to support politicians who foster the belief that they understand voters' needs and priorities. As one recent voter put it, "If you want to win my vote, you need to show me that you understand our reality" (The Guardian, 2015).

Feeling understood appears often in psychological theories. For example, the perceived availability and responsiveness of attachment figures is central to attachment theory, and this concept incorporates the perception of being understood by them in emotionally significant ways (Bowlby, 1988). Self-verification theory's core principle is people's motive to confirm their self-views through social interaction, a process that begins with feeling known by those partners (Swann, 1990). In self-determination theory, support for autonomy depends on the extent to which a supporter's actions are experienced as correctly understanding one's self-perceived needs (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Self-disclosure theories view the sharing of thoughts and feelings as a vehicle for fostering mutual understanding (Reis & Shaver, 1988), an idea that builds on Sullivan's (1953) classic interpersonal theory. And finally, client-centered psychotherapy emphasizes strategies that facilitate patients' feeling heard and understood (e.g., Rogers, 1951).

In this article, we review research findings on feeling understood and present a theoretical framework that can guide further conceptualization and research. Our model focuses on perceiving that one is understood, or in other words, people's belief that another person knows one's thoughts and feelings, needs, and preferences. This type of understanding has been an elusive concept in social psychology. Our definition explicitly distinguishes feeling understood from actual understanding, a distinction that has sometimes been conflated in prior work, adding ambiguity to what we know about these constructs. As we explain, feeling understood is a person's perception that another person knows oneself. Actual understanding, in contrast, indicates that the other person actually and accurately knows oneself. Although actual understanding surely contributes to feeling understood, many other variables also influence feeling understood.

The paper begins with a review of definitional and measurement issues, followed by a brief overview of evidence about the association between actual and perceived understanding. We then present a theoretical model of perceived understanding,¹ with particular emphasis on situational, dispositional, and relational factors that influence perceived understanding. The next section reviews evidence about the importance of feeling understood for personal and relationship well-being. The paper concludes by discussing implications of this model for theory and research.

2 | DEFINING AND ASSESSING FEELING UNDERSTOOD

The term "feeling understood" is often used imprecisely in ordinary language, which may lead to conceptual ambiguity. Our working definition is intended to distinguish feeling understood from several related constructs. In the definition that follows, we explain what we mean by feeling understood and we frame its relation to these other constructs.

Feeling understood refers to one person's belief that another person knows oneself. "Knowing oneself" is an intentionally broad term, encompassing both momentary and chronic experiences, and spanning the self both as object, or the known entity, and as subject, or the knowing agent (James, 1890/1981; Leary & Tangney, 2012). The former includes a person's knowledge about himself or herself, such as self-perceptions, needs, beliefs, feelings, values, and personal history, whereas the latter includes online psychological processes, such as flow of consciousness, active goals, and feeling states. Thus, to feel fully understood, one would have to believe that another person "gets the facts right about me" and also appreciates how the self experiences the social world.

Feeling understood is not necessarily grounded in concrete or accurate knowledge of what the other person specifically knows, but may be based on a more general sense of the other's insight and perspective. For example, people

¹Throughout this paper, we use the terms "perceived understanding" and "felt understanding" interchangeably to refer to how well a person believes that he or she is understood by others.

sometimes feel understood after relatively brief interactions and based on superficial cues, rendering explicit communication secondary or even irrelevant to felt understanding. Thus, when people feel understood, they may be less likely to explain their behavior to partners, as they would with less well-acquainted others, because they assume that the other already “gets it.” This assumption can lead to misunderstanding. It is possible to think of feeling understood in loosely Bayesian terms, as a set of prior probabilities about what the other already knows, which may be based on a variety of factors, and which are updated only when a sufficiently compelling body of evidence regarding the other’s understanding has been acquired.

Operationally, person A’s perception of being understood by person B implies congruence between person A’s experience of the self and the world and person A’s beliefs regarding how person B perceives those experiences (which we refer to as a *reflected appraisal*; Sullivan, 1953). In other words, people feel understood when they believe that others are fully cognizant of their experiences of the self and the world. This comparison can be explicit, when a person directly and consciously contrasts self-perceptions with beliefs about what another person thinks about the self—for example, when receiving the perfect gift from a romantic partner (“you knew exactly what I wanted!”). It is also often implicit, such as might arise spontaneously after an open and engaging conversation or when thinking about a close family member. Either type of comparison may be influenced by biasing factors, as our model later indicates.

With this definition in mind, feeling understood can be distinguished from several related constructs:

2.1 | Actual understanding

Actual understanding refers to what the other actually knows about oneself. When feeling understood corresponds to others’ actual understanding, feeling understood may be said to be accurate. On the other hand, as the model described below proposes, people may feel understood in the absence of others’ actual understanding, such as by a long-time friend, and they may feel misunderstood when actual understanding is relatively high, such as by a manipulative salesperson. Of course, perceived understanding is typically based on the assumption that actual understanding exists, but, as our model will indicate, it also reflects other processes.

2.2 | Compassion, sympathy, and empathy

Understanding differs from qualities that involve understanding but also include other affective or motivational components, such as compassion, sympathy, and empathy. Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas (2010) define compassion as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (p. 351). Sprecher and Fehr (2009, 2005) and Underwood (2009) characterize compassionate love as a form of caregiving that is focused on understanding and genuine acceptance of another’s needs and wishes and expressed through openness, warmth, and a willingness to put a partner’s goals ahead of one’s own. Somewhat related definitions have been suggested for sympathy; Wispé (1986), for example, referred to sympathy as “the heightened awareness of another’s plight as something to be alleviated” (p. 314). The perception that another person understands oneself differs from the perception that another person is compassionate or sympathetic primarily in that perceived understanding need not involve an affective, caregiving element. Another common term, empathy, invokes not only accurate understanding of one’s emotions by another person but also other elements, such as imaginative sharing by them (Sarot, 1992) or compassion and sympathy (Batson & Powell, 2003). Although feeling understood often coincides with perceptions of compassionate or caregiving motives, we view these as distinct constructs. A partner may be perceived as understanding but not sympathetic, compassionate, or empathic when that person is believed to have knowledge about one’s experiences but is not motivated to benefit the self.

2.3 | Trust

Trust refers to the belief that a relationship partner will be responsive to one’s needs both now and in the future (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Such responsiveness incorporates knowledge and motivation: To trust in a partner’s

responsiveness, the partner must be thought to understand one's needs and to be willing to act beneficially on them. People feel safe and secure, or trusting, when both of these components are fulfilled (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Consistent with this line of reasoning, a combination of both caring motivation and accurate understanding has been shown to facilitate responsive behavior (Winczewski, Bowen, & Collins, 2016). Understanding one's needs and desires is an important first step in being responsive to those needs and desires, and partners cannot be responsive if they do not understand. But even knowledgeable partners will not be trusted if they lack caregiving motivation. We therefore see feeling understood as necessary but not sufficient for trust.

2.4 | Validation

The Reis and Shaver intimacy model (Reis & Shaver, 1988; see also Reis & Patrick, 1996) distinguishes understanding from validation by emphasizing the difference between perceiving a partner's point of view or attributes and appreciating and valuing them. Although in everyday experience, understanding and validation tend to co-occur, and both contribute to responsiveness (Reis & Clark, 2013), two brief examples will show why the distinction matters. Validating expressions of positive regard are likely to feel meaningless or irrelevant when one feels misunderstood by the validating partner (as a pair of experiments by Patrick and Reis, 1995, reported in Reis, 2006, showed). On the other hand, people can feel understood but not validated by a partner who knows and criticizes or exploits one's personal vulnerabilities.

2.5 | Self-verification

A final distinction concerns the difference between felt understanding and self-verification. Self-verification focuses primarily on identity, and most research is based on self-perceptions of abilities (e.g., social skills, academic ability, and athletic ability), whereas we see feeling understood as a broader concept that includes understanding one's thoughts, feelings, and motivation, as well as identity. According to self-verification theory, people are motivated to verify, or confirm, their self-perceptions (Swann, 1990, 2012). This means that "people prefer others to see them as they see themselves, even if those self-views happen to be negative" (2011, p. 23). This is thought to be a central motive because people rely on their self-perceptions to predict and control the social environment (Swann, 1990). However, we do not advance this argument for felt understanding. As we describe later, we view the motivation to be understood as dynamic and multiply determined, and we argue that people sometimes do not want to be understood.

Furthermore, people can feel understood even when they are not verified. Partners can communicate that they understand our negative self-view and appreciate its sources and consequences, but simultaneously convey a more positive perception of our qualities, thereby imparting high understanding but providing low verification. For example, a partner can communicate understanding about why one feels undeserving of a pay raise but also express disagreement with that view. (This distinction between conveying understanding and providing self-verifying feedback is important in insight-oriented psychotherapies.) To be sure, the extensive body of empirical research supporting self-verification theory buttresses our belief in the importance of feeling understood (see Swann, 2012, for a review). However, we see theoretical clarity in focusing on the broader concept of perceived understanding.

3 | ASSESSING PERCEIVED UNDERSTANDING

Felt understanding has been measured in two general ways. The first, and simpler, method assesses the construct directly. Participants are asked to rate the extent to which they feel understood by a relationship partner, or, alternatively, to answer a set of Likert-scale items conceptually related to perceived understanding, which are then combined into a single score. For example: "My partner is an excellent judge of my character" and "My partner really understands me: he/she sees the same virtues in me as I see in myself" (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002a; see

also Long & Andrews, 1990). We call this the *direct construct* method. This format may also be used to assess felt understanding in circumscribed domains, such as how well-understood a person feels by a sexual partner, a supervisor at work, or a teacher.

Alternatively, felt understanding can be assessed indirectly by computing an index of correspondence across a series of self-views and reflected appraisals. For example, researchers might ask Partner A to rate his enjoyment of several foods and the extent to which he believes that Partner B thinks that he likes each of the foods. The correspondence between these two ratings, typically gauged by profile correlations, estimates felt understanding by quantifying the level of agreement between A's preferences and his perception of B's view of those preferences (e.g., de Jong & Reis, 2014; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). We call this the *correspondence* method.

Like most psychological attributes, felt understanding can refer to states (perceiving the other as understanding in the moment) or traits (perceiving the other as understanding across time). Felt understanding may also refer to global beliefs (perceiving the other as understanding about one's experiences generally) or specific beliefs (perceiving the other as understanding about a specific experience or aspect of oneself). This results in the four categories shown in Table 1, which vary in terms of temporal frame and level of specificity. Although in principle any of these four categories can be assessed with either the direct construct or correspondence method, in practice, the direct construct method is usually used to collect global judgments, whereas the correspondence method is more common for specific domains of felt understanding (e.g., sexual preferences and personality traits). As a result, differences ascribed to method may be confounded with levels of specificity. Another consideration is that research rarely is explicit about whether it focuses on states or traits; for example, surveys typically assume that respondents are describing trait levels.

The state–trait and global-specific distinctions may be consequential, although they have not been explored in research. Several hypotheses based on related findings may be offered. For one, we expect that global and trait levels of feeling understood are more strongly related to relationship well-being over time than specific and state levels. However, when relationship well-being is measured as a state, it may fluctuate in accordance with state felt understanding. Second, perceived understanding may be particularly important for attributes that are important to the self or relationships and on which people feel certain about their standing (Swann & Gill, 1997). Also, because global perceptions of partner understanding summarize more information than specific perceptions, global perceptions may be more weakly anchored in the particulars of interaction and more influenced by cognitive and motivational biases and qualities of perceivers. Hence, global perceptions of partner understanding may correspond less well than specific perceptions to the partner's actual understanding. Furthermore, because they are more rooted in others' actual understanding and defined in terms of specific moments, we also expect more variability across time, partners, and circumstances in state than trait perceptions of understanding, and in specific than global perceived understanding. Global and trait perceptions seem more likely to reflect dispositional influences, which should improve their stability across time, partners, and circumstances.

The Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 1994, 2004; Kenny & Albright, 1987) may be particularly useful for untangling the various components that go into perceived understanding, and thereby allowing researchers to address several key unanswered questions. To date, no research of which we are aware has decomposed ratings of feeling understood into the components of variance emphasized in the SRM. The SRM asks groups of several participants (typically, around 4–6) to make judgments about each other, so that these judgments can be decomposed into their

TABLE 1 Levels of representation at which felt understanding can be assessed

	Temporal frame of reference	
	State	Trait
Specific attributes	In this moment or instance, I think my partner understands my food preferences.	In general, I think my partner understands my food preferences.
Global feelings	In this moment or instance, I think my partner understands me.	In general, I think my partner understands me.

constituent elements. In a typical analysis, *perceiver effects* refer to properties of the rater; *target effects* refer to properties of the entity being rated; and *relationship effects* refer to unique assessments of that entity by that rater. As an example, consider Dick's perceptions of being understood by Jane. In the SRM, this belief is a function of three components: perceiver effects (To what extent does Dick feel understood by other people?), target effects (To what extent do other people feel understood by Jane?), and relationship effects (To what extent does Dick feel uniquely understood by Jane; that is, beyond levels that the perceiver and target tendencies would predict?).² Note that in this example, the rating being decomposed is a reflected appraisal (i.e., Dick's assessment of how well Jane understands him) rather than a direct rating (i.e., Dick's assessment of Jane).

Research that uses the SRM to decompose ratings of feeling understood would be valuable for several reasons, the chief one being the value of distinguishing feelings of being understood and misunderstood that are grounded in individual differences (e.g., high vs. low self-esteem and secure vs. anxious attachment) from those that are attributable to the dynamics of particular relationships. We theorize that most people feel understood by some partners and not by others and that these understanding and nonunderstanding partners are not the same for everyone. In other words, relationship effects should be important. This prediction follows from research showing that relationship effects often account for considerably more variance than perceiver or target effects (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008; Miller, 1990). SRM analyses would also permit fine-grained identification of the distinct sources of variance that contribute to feeling understood and each of their interpersonal consequences.

Of the various terms that an SRM analysis yields (Kenny, 1994), two seem particularly relevant. *Perceiver accuracy* refers to the correlation between Dick's feelings of being generally understood by multiple others—a perceiver effect—and the degree to which those others report understanding him. *Dyadic accuracy* refers to the correlation between how Dick feels uniquely understood by Jane and how well she reports understanding him. (By “uniquely,” we mean the variance remaining after removing variance associated with the perceiver and target effects). These terms might be used to estimate the degree to which various behaviors are related to feeling understood; for example, whether other people's warmth or coldness is related to the perceiver and dyadic components of feeling understood.³

The SRM might also be used to investigate judgmental processes related to feeling understood. For example, researchers might want to know whether certain personality variables are related to the tendency of some people to induce others to feel understood by them (i.e., so-called “good listeners”). One might also look at *consensus*: To what extent do multiple individuals feel understood by a particular target? This question might be asked in a study of psychotherapists' effectiveness, using target effects. Or a relationship researcher might examine two types of reciprocity. *Generalized reciprocity* refers to the correlation between perceiver and target effects and asks whether people who feel understood by others are also good at leading others to feel understood by them. Perhaps, generalized reciprocity is greater in communication contexts that emphasize openness. *Dyadic reciprocity* refers to the correlation between relationship effects: If Dick feels uniquely understood by Jane, does Jane feel uniquely understood by Dick? This kind of reciprocity might be especially likely to foster commitment.

4 | JUST HOW MUCH DO PEOPLE ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER?

As already discussed, feeling understood by a partner is conceptually distinct from actually being understood. Nevertheless, because perceived understanding may partially reflect actual understanding, it will be useful to briefly review the existing literature on how well people actually understand each other. (A review of this literature is also useful

²In many studies, relationship variance is confounded with error variance. To unconfound these terms, researchers must use multiple measures or assessments.

³Of course, ratings of the extent to which a person feels understood are inherently subjective, because they gauge the extent to which people believe that others perceive them correctly. Thus, computing accuracy via SRM analyses is akin to asking whether a subjective judgment is objectively correct.

because, as discussed below, the accuracy of felt understanding represents a kind of actual understanding: How well people discern what others know about them.)

People generally understand others, at least to some degree. Meta-analyses of personality perception research indicate that observers exhibit a moderate degree of understanding of targets' personality, even following minimal exposure to targets (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Connelly & Ones, 2010). However, understanding depends on various characteristics of perceivers and targets, including perceivers' perceptiveness and targets' tendency to provide diagnostically useful information (Funder, 1995; Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997). For example, understanding tends to be elevated when highly empathic perceivers are matched with highly expressive targets (Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008). In addition, understanding seems to be greater for highly visible traits, such as extraversion and conscientiousness, relative to less visible traits, such as emotional stability (Connelly & Ones, 2010; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Vazire, 2010). Also, specific attributes (e.g., leaves dishes in the sink) tend to be more readily understood than global qualities (e.g., conscientiousness), perhaps because specific attributes depend on better-defined information and leave less room for interpretation (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005).

The relationship between perceiver and target may be an important moderator. Perceivers understand targets' personality better when they have access to large amounts of information (Blackman & Funder, 1998; Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006), as often happens in closer relationships. Perceivers understand acquaintances better than they understand strangers (Connelly & Ones, 2010; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Stinson & Ickes, 1992; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), and some findings indicate that understanding of acquaintances increases over time (Paulhus & Bruce, 1992). A meta-analysis of 78 studies examining understanding (or "tracking accuracy") across many judgment domains in romantic relationships found a significant and substantial mean effect size ($r = .47$; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). In fact, close others sometimes predict targets' future behavior and experiences better than, and independently of, targets themselves, suggesting that close partners sometimes understand targets better than targets understand themselves (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000; Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

However, other studies have shown that degree of acquaintance is unrelated to accuracy (e.g., Bernieri, Zuckerman, Koestner, & Rosenthal, 1994; Kenny, Albright, Malloy, & Kashy, 1994; Swann & Gill, 1997), and Ambady and Rosenthal's (1992) meta-analysis did not find improvements in accuracy when perceivers are exposed to target behavior for longer durations. Similarly, Fletcher and Kerr's (2010) meta-analysis found no effect of romantic relationship length on accuracy. Degree of acquaintance, typically operationalized as relationship length or as a categorical distinction between stranger and acquaintance, may be an unreliable predictor of understanding because it does not straightforwardly index perceivers' access to relevant information about targets nor does it reflect perceivers' motivation to accurately understand targets. Some lengthy relationships are unlikely to involve high levels of self-disclosure and may permit observation of behavior only in limited contexts (e.g., coworkers or neighbors), whereas relatively new acquaintanceships may involve high levels of openness. Intimacy ratings therefore may be a better indicator of how well people know each other. To this point, Paunonen (1989) found that the subjective degree of acquaintance (i.e., how well the perceiver feels he or she knows the target) was a strong moderator of understanding. Nonetheless, closeness is, at best, an imperfect proxy, for the quality and quantity of information perceivers have about targets (Swann & Gill, 1997), and knowledge may be unevenly distributed across judgment domains (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Furthermore, the effect of intimacy on understanding is complicated by the fact that intimate partners are often motivated to see each other in desired, rather than accurate, ways, especially after having committed to the relationship (Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). These moderators are likely to influence the effects of acquaintanceship and intimacy on perceived understanding.

5 | THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ACTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND FEELING UNDERSTOOD

To what extent do perceptions of being understood accurately reflect others' actual understanding? Research on the accuracy of reflected appraisals (also called meta-perceptions in the literature) has direct implications for the accuracy

of perceived understanding because knowing that one is understood or misunderstood may first require knowing how one is viewed. Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) reviewed much of the early literature on this issue, concluding that people generally feel understood—that is, self-perceptions tend to align well with people's perceptions of how they are viewed by others. However, these perceptions of being understood tend to be much greater than the evidence for actual understanding (here, associations between self-perceptions and others' actual views). Kenny and DePaulo's (1993) more recent review extended this conclusion. Although people are reasonably accurate at discerning how they are viewed in general, they are poor at detecting differences in how they are viewed by specific others (called distinctive meta-insight by Mosch & Borkenau, 2016). Thus, the common tendency to perceive that others understand one-self, reflected in convergence between perceivers' self-views and reflected appraisals, may exaggerate, and perhaps correlate only minimally with, specific others' actual understanding.

Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) provided a more direct test of the extent to which perceived understanding is rooted in a partner's actual understanding. They assessed specific partner understanding (referred to as "knowledge") by examining convergence between partner reports about the participant and participants' self-reports in several specific domains, such as personality traits, behaviors, and food preferences. Specific partner understanding did not predict global perceptions of being understood by the partner in most analyses. This study adds to the body of evidence suggesting that global perceptions of being understood may be disconnected from more specific indicators of others' actual knowledge.

Why might the accuracy of perceived understanding be limited? Perceived understanding represents a special kind of judgment about others, namely, the degree to which one can infer what others think about oneself. And much like any other judgments about others, including the judgments that underlie actual understanding, accuracy of perceived understanding depends on a variety of dispositional, situational, and relationship factors. In the model that follows, we discuss evidence for epistemic and motivational factors that influence perceptions of being understood by others.

6 | A MODEL OF PERCEPTIONS OF A PARTNER'S UNDERSTANDING

The theoretical model depicted in Figure 1 is presented with two general purposes in mind: one, to provide a systematic organizational framework for representing and integrating the various specific variables that affect perceived understanding and two, to indicate gaps in existing research that might fruitfully be pursued. The model indicates that feeling understood reflects the complex interplay of a variety of factors. One set of inputs follows from Person B's actual understanding of A, which underlies the accuracy component of A's felt understanding. In the model, the influence of these inputs is mediated by B's behavior. This mediational link is necessary because A does not have direct

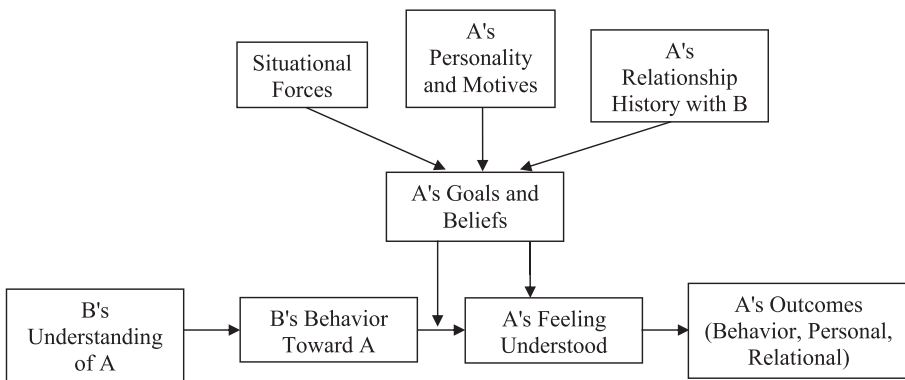


FIGURE 1 A Theoretical Model of the Processes that Contribute to Feeling Understood

access to the content of B's mind but rather must rely on behavioral markers of B's internal states (which include verbal content, nonverbal expressions, and actions). The relative weight of B's behavior for judgments of perceived understanding—that is, whether it is noticed and the extent to which it influences the resulting judgments—depends on the interplay of situational, relational, and individual difference factors, both during interaction and at the time that judgments are obtained.

We propose that three factors—situational forces, A's personality and motives, and A's relationship with B (indicated along the top of Figure 1)—influence A's felt understanding, but that these effects are more proximally mediated by situationally specific goals and beliefs (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Kuhl, 2000), such as A's desire to be understood by B and A's belief that B usually understands him or her. In other words, these factors influence perceived understanding according to what the person in that situation is trying to accomplish, from a motivational standpoint, or believes, from a cognitive standpoint. These motivational and cognitive influences may promote accuracy or foster bias, as described below. Although bias and accuracy are often couched as competing alternatives, relationship research has long recognized that they can and typically do coexist and may be shaped by distinct forces (see Gagné & Lydon, 2004, and Fletcher & Kerr, 2010, for reviews). This recognition highlights the value of simultaneously examining the factors that promote accuracy and those that foster bias in people's tendencies to recognize how well their relationship partners understand them.

6.1 | Factors that promote or impair accurate perceptions of a partner's understanding

We first discuss factors that influence the relative weight of B's actual understanding of A on A's feeling understood by B. If people believe that their thoughts, feelings, and internal states are more transparent than they actually are, as many studies indicate (Cameron & Vorauer, 2008), then they are likely to approach social interaction with a default (albeit often erroneous) assumption that others, particularly relationship partners, understand them. This bias may be corrected during interaction, both by increasing actual and perceived understanding and by providing diagnostic information regarding the partner's understanding. For example, suppose that Linda explains to John in some detail her intense fear of public speaking. As a result, John is likely to understand her better and Linda may feel better understood, leading to converging perceptions of his understanding. Furthermore, John's response provides information that allows Linda to more accurately infer how well he understands her.

Accurate discernment of a partner's understanding may depend on characteristics of the communication process. For example, the more specific and elaborate B's response, the more diagnostic it is likely to be of his or her actual understanding (Davis & Perkowski, 1979). All other things being equal, thoughtful, detailed responses are more likely to foster feeling understood than brief, nonspecific comments such as "I see." However, brief responses such as "I see" may hide the listener's lack of understanding better than more detailed but incorrect responses. Also, perceivers' perceptions of listeners' understanding may be more accurate when perceivers have more information about the listener (e.g., Letzring et al., 2006), when the listener is highly expressive (e.g., Vazire, 2010; Zaki et al., 2008) and has little or no motivation to deceive the perceiver, and when the perceiver is judgmentally skilled (e.g., Hall, Andrzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009) and nondefensive (e.g., Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Fillo, 2015).

The availability of information about a recipient's understanding may also depend on relationship factors. For example, diagnostic information should be more available in intimate relationships, which are characterized by mutual self-disclosure. Research shows that disclosure of information is conducive to partners' better understanding of one's needs (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015) and greater responsiveness (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). In line with these findings, accuracy, and hence feeling understood, is likely to be higher among couples who express high levels of intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005), who feel intimate (Finkenauer & Buyukcan-Tetik, 2015), whose relationships have high communal strength (Clark & Aragon, 2013), and who feel relationally satisfied (Sanford, 2006).

As Figure 1 indicates, perceiver variables also affect the degree to which perceived understanding reflects the partner's actual understanding. Perceivers must accurately decode the level of understanding implied by a partner's

behavior, which may not be a simple task. Thinking about the extent to which social feedback relates to one's experiences, which is a central part of judging whether one is understood, requires cognitive resources that are in short supply when people are cognitively busy, as they usually are during social interaction (Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann & Schroeder, 1995). Even if people have the motivation and resources to discern a partner's understanding, understanding does not seem to have clear-cut behavioral cues, which may render a partner's understanding a particularly ambiguous quality to determine. It would be useful for future research to identify which behavioral cues people find most diagnostic in inferring how well their partners understand them and examine the extent to which those cues align with cues of actual understanding.

Motivational processes have also been shown to promote accuracy. In their relational lives, people are often motivated by epistemic concerns—that is, by the desire to deduce a truthful and coherent account of their relationships (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). Research suggests that accuracy motivation is heightened at choice points in the development or deterioration of a relationship, or when outcome dependency is high (Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Neuberg, 1989; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). Also, relationship partners may have more accurate knowledge about relationship-relevant issues, which Gill and Swann (2004) referred to as pragmatic accuracy, because it facilitates accomplishment of relationship-relevant goals. The importance of accuracy in pursuing epistemic goals is central to the “motivated tactician” model of social cognition, which conceptualizes social cognition as a means for striving to attain one's goals in the most efficient and effective way possible (Fiske, 1992; Kruglanski, 1996). Numerous situational and individual difference factors are known to increase the strength of epistemic goals and hence the accuracy of social perception (see Fiske & Taylor, 2013, for a review).

People may be motivated to accurately discern who understands them because being understood has implications for their pursuit of nonrelational goals. Many personal goals may be facilitated or thwarted by others who are aware of these goals, a dependence that is common in the context of close relationships (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Planning and moving toward one's goals therefore depend on being able to predict whether partners will be supportive or obstructionary, a prediction that has at least two components: believing that partners comprehend one's goals and priorities (feeling understood) and believing that they are able and willing to provide appropriate support (called behavioral affirmation by Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

The social support literature illustrates how understanding may facilitate the goal of receiving support. According to matching theories, social support is most effective when the type of support provided matches the coping requirements of the stressor (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Such matching would likely be enabled by a potential supporter's accurate understanding of the coping ability of the person who is stressed. More pointedly, people who feel understood may more readily anticipate that this calibrated type of support is available; feeling misunderstood, in contrast, would undercut confidence in the availability of appropriate support. This idea can explain why people sometimes feel undermined by visible support—seemingly helpful support that implies personal inadequacy in one's ability to cope with a salient stressor (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). As it is clearly not calibrated to one's needs, receiving such support may communicate lack of partner understanding.

6.2 | Factors that promote or impair biased perceptions of a partner's understanding

Like all social cognitions, perceptions of being understood are subject to bias created by situational forces, perceiver dispositions, and relationship history (as depicted in Figure 1). Such biases, well-known in the social-psychological and relationship literatures, may create overly inflated or unduly depressed perceptions of understanding relative to a partner's actual understanding and therefore reduce the extent to which perceptions of understanding are rooted in reality. Cognitive factors contribute to misaligned perceptions of understanding in several ways. For example, people often project their self-views onto their images of how they are viewed by others (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), think that others attend to their behavior more than others actually do (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000), believe that their internal states are more observable than they actually are (Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998), anticipate that their partners' current behaviors will continue into the future (Lemay,

Lin, & Muir, 2015), and think that their partners are more similar to themselves than they actually are (de Jong & Reis, 2014; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002b). All of these processes could foster inflated perceptions of others' understanding relative to their actual understanding.

Perceptions of understanding also may be biased by relationship satisfaction or positive affect. Satisfied and happy individuals tend to assume that they are understood, even in times of conflict and emotional upheaval (Cohen, Schulz, Weiss, & Waldinger, 2012; Sanford, 2006). Conversely, depressed and lonely individuals tend to perceive that their partners do not understand them (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2005; Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Gordon, Tuskeviciute, & Chen, 2013). Similarly, people who experience negative interactions with others tend to believe that they are not understood (Liu & Rook, 2013) and anxiously attached individuals, who anticipate rejection by others, tend to feel misunderstood by their coworkers (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). A history of feeling misunderstood by a partner can make such feelings chronically accessible and more likely to influence subsequent interaction with and feelings about that partner (Sanford, 1998).

A specific motivation to be understood (or not understood) may also bias perceptions of understanding. Feeling understood bolsters existing perceptions of the self and the world, which people depend on to navigate their environments and negotiate social interactions (Swann, 1990). Additionally, in many circumstances, being accurately understood by a partner may signal genuine acceptance (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001) and facilitate harmonious interactions unencumbered by potential costs of misunderstanding (e.g., being the target of inappropriate expectations and behaviors). Hence, being understood is often desired. Given that desires can bias cognition in a confirmatory manner (Kunda, 1990), people who want to be understood may arrive at the desired conclusion that they are understood. This motivation may vary across judgment domains. For example, people seem to have an especially strong desire to have their self-views understood when those self-views are held with a high degree of importance or certainty (Pelham, 1991; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2002) or when they are culturally valued (Oishi, Koo, & Akimoto, 2008).

We further expect that the desire to be understood would be stronger in close than in peripheral relationships, although research has not yet examined this prediction. In close, communal relationships, believing that one's needs and desires are understood is likely to bolster confidence, or trust, that partners are able and willing to fulfill those needs and desires. Trust involves the expectation that a partner will be responsive to one's needs and wishes (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), and this expectation, in part, depends on the partner's ability to act benevolently (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Felt understanding may determine people's confidence that their partners have the knowledge and ability to enact the most salutary behaviors, because only partners who are perceived to be truly understanding should be expected to identify and deal effectively with one's wants and needs. Perhaps ironically, though, confidence that a partner knows one well can also increase people's tendency to project their self-perceptions onto what they believe a partner thinks about them (i.e., their partner-specific meta-perceptions; Mosch & Borkenau, 2016).

Interdependence theory, and in particular the risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006), offers a related perspective. Close relationships often create competing priorities, in which partners must balance their own, and their partner's, personal goals and preferences. People often adopt cognitive strategies to quell concerns about the relationship, a proposition that has been supported by extensive empirical evidence (Murray et al., 1996; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). There is good reason to expect that illusory levels of felt understanding—believing that partners understand oneself better than they actually do—can serve this same sort of relationship-promoting end. For example, de Jong and Reis (2014) demonstrated that sexually satisfied individuals felt that their sexual partners understood their sexual preferences better than those partners actually did.

Nevertheless, there are circumstances in which feeling understood might undermine relational security. According to Ickes and Simpson's (1997) empathic accuracy model, material that is threatening to a relationship may undermine partners' motivation to accurately understand each other. In one study, compared to those who felt secure, people who felt insecure about their relationship tended to less accurately perceive their partner's interest in an attractive opposite-sex other (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). A similar process may pertain to perceived

understanding. Relationship insecurity may foster declines in feeling understood when the underlying thoughts and feelings are threatening to the relationship. For example, lower levels of trust in romantic relationships may encourage higher levels of self-concealment (Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012), which seems likely to lead to feeling less well understood. Furthermore, perceiving that a partner understands one's negative qualities may impair relationship security when partners are thought to have high standards in that domain (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). For example, believing that a partner accurately perceives one's moodiness may threaten confidence in the partner's satisfaction and commitment if the partner is known to value emotional stability in their relationships.

As these studies imply, the desire to be understood may at times conflict with other relationship motives. Research on self-esteem provides an example of this conflict. Because they tend to have a contingent sense of interpersonal acceptance (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996) and at times doubt their partner's love (Murray et al., 2000), low self-esteem individuals may worry that having a partner understand their self-attributed negative qualities will result in global devaluation and rejection by that partner. This may explain why low self-esteem individuals sometimes seek positive feedback from others, even at the expense of being misunderstood (Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2003). For example, low self-esteem people on a first date want to be seen as physically attractive, despite typically seeing themselves as unattractive (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

Relationship stage may also determine whether other goals eclipse the desire to be understood. Having one's negative attributes understood by a partner may be more threatening in the early stages of a relationship, when people are less certain about the partner's regard and commitment (Iafrate, Bertoni, Donato, & Finkenauer, 2012). Consistent with this idea, receiving negative feedback that matched negative self-views reduced perceived regard and intimacy for participants in shorter but not in longer relationships (Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006). Similarly, dating partners reported higher intimacy when they were evaluated favorably by their partners, whereas married partners reported higher intimacy when they received feedback that was consistent with their self-views (Swann et al., 1994). Figure 1 further suggests that one's relationship history with a partner may also accentuate the primacy of other motives over the desire to be understood. For example, partners in a tenuous relationship (e.g., with a past history of infidelity) may prefer to keep their fantasies about other partners to themselves. The interplay of prior relationship history with motivated goals is a topic that warrants future research.

It may be useful to summarize the research described in this section in terms of goal constructs. In most circumstances, feeling understood makes it easier to feel accepted by relationship partners and confident about their ability to provide appropriate help and support. Because these feelings are central to relationship security, people often will be motivated to perceive higher levels of understanding than are objectively warranted, especially in circumstances in which feeling secure is important. On the other hand, when actual understanding would threaten relationship security, people may instead be motivated to perceive that their partners do not understand them well, either to minimize damage to their self-esteem or to bolster their belief that potentially relationship-harming content is hidden from their partners.

7 | BENEFITS OF PERCEIVED UNDERSTANDING

Several studies have examined associations between actual understanding and relationship quality. Some studies suggest no relationship. For example, Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) found that partners' understanding of specific qualities was not related to global measures of relationship quality. Fletcher and Kerr's (2010) meta-analysis concluded that perceived relationship quality was unrelated to tracking accuracy (i.e., the extent to which judgments about partners were correlated with an accuracy criterion). However, other evidence indicates a positive association between actual partner understanding and relationship quality. For example, some studies have shown that empathic accuracy during conflict promotes relationship well-being (e.g., Cohen et al., 2012; Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002). Similarly, de Jong and Reis (2014) found that women were more sexually satisfied when their male partners accurately perceived their sexual preferences.

Effective pursuit of epistemic goals may require that judgments about others' understanding possess a reasonable degree of accuracy—what Bowlby called “tolerably accurate reflections” of reality (Bowlby, 1973, p. 202). Bowlby's position was based on his theorizing that perceptions of others' understanding are critical for the functioning of mental systems that regulate social and emotional activity throughout life. If representations of other people's understanding of oneself were not “tolerably” accurate, they would be poorly adapted to carrying out these regulatory functions, and one's expectations about what to anticipate from others would be unclear (Gagné & Lydon, 2004). For example, knowing how others assess one's desirability as a mate allows people to minimize wasted effort and the emotional cost of potential rejections (Back, Penke, Schmukle, & Asendorpf, 2011). Similarly, believing that relationship partners hold discrepantly positive views of oneself can impair intimacy, presumably because conflict and rejection would be expected once the basis for one's less favorable self-view became known (Swann, Hixon, & de la Ronde, 1992; Tomlinson, Aron, Carmichael, Reis, & Holmes, 2014).

Observational research also supports the idea that accurate understanding promotes relationship quality and personal well-being. For example, in one study, accurate perceptions of a partner's attachment style promoted more constructive communication in problem solving and confiding tasks, as rated by independent observers (Kobak & Hazan, 1991). In another study, Collins and Feeney (2000) found that participants asked to describe a personal problem to their romantic partners felt better supported and showed more positive improvements in mood, when their romantic partners conveyed listening and understanding (according to objective observers). Maisel and Gable (2009) have reported similar results. These findings imply a key, as yet untested, prediction of our model: That the effects of a partner's understanding on relationship quality may be mediated by perception of that understanding and that partner understanding is beneficial only to the extent that it is detected. In other words, consistent with Figure 1, perceived partner understanding, rather than the partner's actual understanding, may be the proximal determinant of benefits.

Indeed, it seems likely that feeling understood enhances relationship quality (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011). Early studies reported that feeling understood was associated with greater marital satisfaction (Cahn, 1990; Cahn & Shulman, 1984; Weger, 2005) and reduced enactment of damaging demand or withdrawal conflict behaviors (Weger, 2005). Perceived understanding has also been linked to trust and perceptions of support receipt in close relationships (Weber, Johnson, & Corrigan, 2004) and with more positive self-disclosure and support provision in sibling and step-child–stepparent relationships (Avtgis, Martin, & Rocca, 2000; Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1999). However, some of these studies operationalized felt understanding as positive affect in situations where respondents deliberately tried to make themselves understood by others; they did not assess whether respondents actually felt understood. Hence, these results are better viewed as affective responses to efforts to be understood rather than the experience of actually feeling understood. The two constructs are, of course, distinct: People sometimes feel understood when their affect is not positive, and they may feel understood without trying. Research should distinguish the perception of others' understanding from potential determinants (e.g., trying to be understood) and consequences (e.g., affect) of that perception.

More recent research has examined relational implications of perceived understanding using more direct measures of perceived understanding. For example, Pollmann and Finkenauer (2009) found that global perceived understanding, based on a measure of generalized partner beliefs (e.g., “My partner knows me well”; Birnbaum & Reis, 2006), was strongly associated with several key indicators of relationship quality among newlyweds, including dyadic adjustment, intimacy, and trust. Similar findings have been reported with regard to perceived partner empathy (Cohen et al., 2012; Cramer & Jowett, 2010) and perceived partner responsiveness (Laurenceau et al., 1998, 2005). In addition, perceiving that partners accurately understand one's sexual desires has been associated with greater sexual satisfaction (de Jong & Reis, 2014, 2015).

Feeling understood by others is also closely connected to perceiving that relationships are intimate (Lippert & Prager, 2001) and meaningful (Liu & Rook, 2013) and to identifying with in-groups (Gómez, Jetten, & Swann, 2014). Moorman (2011) found that older adults were more satisfied with their marriage when they believed that their spouse understood their medical treatment preferences. And finally, Gordon and Chen (2016) found that feeling understood helped buffer the detrimental effects of conflict in romantic couples. Importantly, some of these positive

behavioral effects of perceived partner understanding emerged even when controlling for partners' accurate understanding.

Even a partner's efforts to be understanding may benefit relationships. Cohen et al. (2012) found that perceptions of a partner's empathic effort—their attempts to understand one's emotions during a high-conflict interaction—were more strongly related to relationship satisfaction than the success (empathic accuracy) of those efforts. Of course, these benefits accrue only when the partner's attempts to be understanding are perceived. The effects of expecting a partner to be understanding during conflict interactions have been shown to be more robust and consistent than expectations about partners' negative communications (Sanford, 2006). Merely expecting a spouse to be understanding during a conflict discussion predicted more positive and constructive communications behavior by both spouses.

Perceived understanding also appears to shape the quality of professional relationships. Students' perceptions of being understood by their teachers are strongly predictive of their evaluations of those teachers (Cahn, 1984). In psychotherapy, clients' feelings of being understood by their therapists correlate with their satisfaction with therapy and increase treatment compliance (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Greenberg, Watson, Elliot, & Bohart, 2001; Pocock, 1997). Perceived understanding is a key component of patient-centered health care (Epstein & Street, 2011), an approach in which practitioners strive to understand how their patients function in everyday life, help their patients understand their health and treatment, and interact in ways that enable patients to feel understood. These types of behaviors are desired by patients and promote satisfaction with care (Little et al., 2001; Ong, De Haes, Hoos, & Lammes, 1995; Reis et al., 2008). In workplace and educational settings, leaders who make members feel understood, such as by demonstrating empathy or good listening skills, are perceived to be better leaders (Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Bechler, 1998; Kluger & Zaidel, 2013).

Beyond relationship qualities, feeling understood also contributes to personal well-being. In one daily diary study, participants felt more satisfied with their lives and reported fewer negative physical symptoms on days when they felt especially understood by other people (Lun, Kesebir, & Oishi, 2008; see also Oishi, Akimoto, Richards, & Suh, 2013a; Reis et al., 2000). In Lun et al.'s study, the effect of daily perceptions of being understood on next day's physical symptoms was especially strong for participants who were high in interdependent self-construal, who consider relationships a central aspect of their identity and who place high priority on relationships. Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging has demonstrated benefits of felt understanding at a neurological level. Experimentally induced felt understanding activated neural regions associated with social connection and reward, whereas experimentally induced perceptions of misunderstanding activated neural regions associated with negative affect (Morelli, Torre, & Eisenberger, 2014).

The effects of perceived understanding and misunderstanding may even extend to basic perceptual processes. Oishi, Schiller, and Gross (2013b) found that experimentally induced feelings of understanding led to decreased pain sensitivity and less extreme judgments about distance and the steepness of a hill, whereas experimentally induced feelings of misunderstanding led to increases in all three perceptual tasks.

Although these findings point to the benefits of perceived understanding, it is also important to note potential drawbacks. As described earlier, the interpersonal consequences of accurately understanding a partner may depend on whether the underlying content is threatening to the relationship (Ickes & Simpson, 1997). In one study, better understanding of a partner's thoughts and feelings was associated with increases in subjective closeness when the thoughts and feelings were nonthreatening but linked to declines in subjective closeness when the thoughts and feelings were threatening to the relationship (Simpson, Orina, & Ickes, 2003). Similarly, research has shown that parents' understanding of their adolescent children's desires for them to change were negatively correlated with those children's satisfaction in the parent-child relationship (Sillars, Koerner, & Fitzpatrick, 2005).

Earlier, we noted that feeling understood might undermine relationship well-being when a partner's agreement with one's self-view is thought to weaken the partner's satisfaction or commitment to the relationship. For example, low self-esteem individuals may worry that their partners would lose regard for them if they understood their self-ascribed negative qualities (Murray et al., 2002b). In this circumstance, people may strive to minimize their partner's understanding of the problematic trait, although ironically this effort may simultaneously impair intimacy and trust

(Swann et al., 1994). This ironic effect can be particularly problematic if those traits are important for the relationship. Other circumstances in which feeling understood has the potential to threaten relationship well-being include jealousy-related thoughts (e.g., attraction to extramarital partners) and complaints (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) or when high levels of feeling understood foster unattainably high or potentially burdensome expectations about a partner's support (Koval, VanDellen, Fitzsimons, & Ranby, 2015).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that actual and perceived understanding, when they involve the realization of flaws or dissatisfaction, can threaten relationships under certain conditions. Nevertheless, research also indicates that in most circumstances, actual and perceived understanding benefit relationships. Many of the cases in which feeling understood appears harmful are characterized by insecurity regarding the relationship or self-regard, suggesting that perceived understanding may interact with relationship factors and individual differences. Much more research is needed to delineate the moderators that shape the relative costs and benefits of perceived understanding.

8 | CONCLUSION

The research reviewed in this article indicates that perceived understanding is a pervasive, persistent, and persuasive force in social life. Across many of our most important relationships, the desire to be understood by others influences social cognition, affect, and behavior in diverse and often potent ways. When people feel understood, they and their relationships generally benefit; when they feel misunderstood, they and their relationships generally suffer. Understanding the conditions that give rise to such feelings of being understood and misunderstood therefore has important implications for enhancing human welfare. We also see as potentially fruitful research on how perceived understanding changes: When and how does it go awry, and how might perceived misunderstanding be ameliorated?

Our theoretical model integrates findings from various areas and of course raises more questions than it answers. We have noted some questions, but we hope that the model evokes many more questions for readers. The large majority of research to date has been conducted by researchers interested in close relationships, but we believe that our model has important implications for many other types of relationships, and we hope that these implications will be explored soon. Of particular importance is research to identify and understand the various sources of convergence and divergence between actual understanding and feeling understood. Greater precision in measurement and analysis, as well as greater conceptual clarity in distinguishing feeling understood, actual understanding, and related constructs, will be essential to this endeavor.

Research is also needed to investigate how people resolve conflicts between the motive to be understood and other relational motives, including well-known motives such as commitment, maintaining and enhancing a partner's regard, inclusion and exclusion, attachment security, and self-expansion. Conflicts between the desire to be understood and any of these (and numerous other) motives may create dilemmas that interacting persons must resolve. Just how they go about this resolution—for example, when and how one motive takes priority over another, or what sorts of ironic effects such resolutions may entail—represents a key question for future research and theory, one that also has important implications for applications.

Whether in interpersonal or intergroup relations, one frequently hears calls about the importance of promoting understanding between individuals, groups, and nations. Our model suggests that this strategy, while worthwhile, may be incomplete: Actual understanding is imperfectly related to feeling understood and to the benefits that accrue when people feel understood. Enhancing human connections may more pointedly require strategies that help individuals, groups, and nations to feel understood.

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