

## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES IN ROMANTIC HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES

This study investigated the relationships between emotional intelligence (EI) and conflict resolution strategies in romantic heterosexual couples. 164 couples solved the Test of Emotional Intelligence (TIE), a Polish measure based on the ability model of EI, and the Problem-Solving Strategies Inventory (PSSI) in two versions: self-report and a report of partner's behavior. We assumed that individuals high in EI should have superior conflict resolution skills and engage in active and constructive strategies, avoiding those characterized as passive and destructive. These hypotheses were supported for women, but not for men. Females' EI was consistently positively related to self-report measures of Voice, and negatively related to self-reports of Neglect. Emotionally intelligent men did not declare use of more constructive or positive conflict resolution styles; however, their female partners judged them as more prone to use of those strategies. The results also revealed a positive assortative mating effect with regard to EI. Additionally, the study demonstrated an interesting disparity between male and female's reports on relationship behaviors.

**Keywords:** Emotional intelligence, couples, conflict resolution, dyadic design

### INTRODUCTION

In an age of rapidly accelerating divorce rates (Barański & Kaczmarek, 2007), the determinants of relationship satisfaction and marriage stability are becoming increasingly important research topics. Investigations aimed at finding answers have already been conducted in the area of individual differences, such as personality (Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998) and intelligence (Watkins & Meredith, 1981). In light of the large amount of data showing an emotional basis for numerous relationship characteristics (the account of which we present in detail in the section below), it seems reasonable to presume that individual differences in emotional abilities are indeed responsible for several relationship qualities. The theory of EI (Mayer & Salovey,

1997) might be applied as a systematic theoretical framework for continuing such inquiries. In the present article, we verify the role of EI in within-couple problem solving strategies.

### Emotional intelligence and conflict in interpersonal relationships

Emotional intelligence remains a controversial albeit increasingly popular construct, attracting the attention of researchers representing a wide range of subdisciplines of psychology since the term was introduced in the early nineties by Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990). Salovey and Mayer, in opposition to what is considered a "mixed model approach" (e.g., Bar-On, 2004), conceptualized EI as a group of mental abilities divided into four branches: perceiving emotions,

understanding emotions, using emotions to facilitate one's cognitive processes, and steering emotions (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey 2000). Since emotional abilities are an integral part of effective social interactions, EI has often been linked with social functioning (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Existing data proves the importance of EI for variables such as self-perceived quality of interpersonal relationship, social support, less antagonistic peer relationships, and communication quality (Lopes, Brackett, Nezlek, Schütz, Sellin, & Salovey, 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Strauss, 2003). Nevertheless, few studies have linked ability-based EI with quality of romantic relationships by implementing a dyadic design. Brackett, Warner, and Bosco (2005) investigated whether EI is related to self-assessed relationship quality. They proved that couples in which both partners ranked low on EI tended to report lower relationship quality than the couples with at least one partner ranking high on EI. Zeidner and Kaluda (2008) reported significant 'actor effects' but no 'partner effects' of EI on romantic love: an individual's EI had an impact mainly on their own affective reactions, rather than on their partner's reactions. In an unpublished report, Brackett, Cox, Gaines, and Salovey (2008) demonstrated that couples in which both partners ranking high on EI reported higher relationship quality than those where both partners exhibited low EI scores, while mismatched couples tended to fall in the middle. These results support the hypothesis of an additive effect of EI in romantic dyads. A recent study by Stolarski and Postek (2011) revealed a curvilinear, n-shaped relationship between EI and sexual satisfaction. This curve reached its peak when EI was slightly above its average, and then dropped considerably as EI scores increased.

According to the theory, EI is supposed to play a vital role in conflict resolution. High level of emotional abilities should enable individuals to see the rationale behind their 'opponents' perspective and understand their goals. Accurate

perception and understanding of other people's feelings as well as emotional management seem to play a crucial role in constructive conflict resolution. The relationship between EI and the preferred style or efficacy of conflict resolution has been verified among Christian clergy (Gambill, 2008), financial services managers (Sherman, 2010), public servants in Nigeria (Salami, 2010), government employees in Indonesia (Shih & Susanto, 2010), and US registered nurses (Morrison, 2008), indicating positive correlations of EI with assertive and cooperative **conflict** modes and negative correlations with unassertive or uncooperative modes. Although close relationships are the most typical settings for the experience of intense emotions and conflicts, astonishingly few studies have explored the relationship between EI and behavior exhibited during interpersonal conflicts. In one such study Smith, Heaven and Ciarrochi (2008) demonstrated that the most satisfied couples were those who did not avoid discussion of relationship problems and who rated their partners high in EI.

Although several authors proposed theories of relationship development and/or deterioration (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1978; Levinger, 1979), the ideas of Caryl E. Rusbult (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982) significantly contributed to contemporary relationship research, providing a clear and reasonable framework for investigation of responses to problems in romantic involvements and the consequences of those responses. Rusbult distinguished four main responses to relationship dissatisfaction or conflict within a couple: Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect. According to Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow (1986, p. 745) the response labeled 'Exit' relates to "*separating, moving out of a joint residence, actively [physically] abusing one's partner, getting a divorce*", Voice responses are "*discussing problems, compromising, seeking help from a friend or therapist, suggesting solutions, changing oneself or one's partner*",

and Loyalty means “*waiting and hoping that things will improve, supporting the partner in the face of criticism, praying for improvement*”. Finally, Neglect refers to “*ignoring the partner or spending less time together, refusing to discuss problems, treating the partner badly [insulting], criticizing the partner for things unrelated to the real problem, just letting things fall apart*”. These four responses differ from one another along two dimensions: *constructiveness/destructiveness* and *activity/passivity* (Rusbult et al., 1986). Voice and Loyalty are considered constructive responses, as they testify to the fact that individuals who are ‘Vocal’ and ‘Loyal’ attempt to revive or maintain the relationship, while Exit and Neglect are relatively destructive. It is worth mentioning that the *constructiveness/destructiveness* dimension refers to the impact of the response strategy on the relationship, not the individual. The second dimension, *activity/passivity*, refers to the “*impact of the response on the problem at hand, not to the character of the behavior itself*” (p. 745). Exit and Voice are considered active strategies, as utilizing them implies ‘doing something with the problem.’ Loyalty and Neglect are situated on the opposite end of this dimension.

Although problem-solving strategies have been widely investigated as predictive variables, influencing the within-relationship level of distress (Rusbult et al., 1986), relationship satisfaction (Kriegerlewicz, 2006), and closeness and intimacy (Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010), they have rarely been examined as dependent variables (e.g., Rusbult, Morrow, & Johnson-Dennis, 1987). Thus, little is known about the origin of particular response style formation.

### Hypotheses

We expect that **(H1)** EI is positively related to Voice - active and constructive problem-solving strategy, which satisfies both parties’ needs. This strategy is based on the ability to accurately perceive and understand one’s own

and partner’s feelings, hence individuals low on EI should not be able to employ it or at least should not be able to employ it effectively. High EI should facilitate Voice. Although Loyalty was shown to be detrimental to relationships in the long term (Overall et al., 2010) it may be useful in the short term, particularly in situations where there is no possibility to apply the Voice strategy (e.g., in presence of other people, or when one prefers to wait for his highly reactive partner’s emotions to calm down). Thus, we did not formulate directional predictions with regard to EI – Loyalty relationships.

Previous research indicates that EI inhibits directly negative, destructive behaviors (e.g. Lopes et al., 2004; Brackett et al., 2008). Therefore, we presumed that **(H2)** EI is negatively related to Neglect and Exit. We assumed that individuals high on EI would not use these dysfunctional strategies because they know how damaging it can be to ignore the feelings and needs expressed by their partners and/or to escalate conflicts.

Some studies show that a trait or characteristic of one partner shapes the way the other partner behaves in, and experiences, the interaction. Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer (2006) proved, for instance, that the attachment style of one partner influences how the other regulates feelings of distress: men who had female partners high in attachment security showed less physiological stress reactivity during conflict. Hence, we assume that the EI of one partner influences the problem-solving strategies preferred by the other. We expect that individuals exhibiting higher EI should be able to ‘manage’ their relationships better, eliciting more constructive and positive reactions from their partners in conflict situations. Therefore, our next hypothesis **(H3)** states that problem-solving strategies are related to partner’s EI, even after controlling for the actor’s EI. Voice is positively related to partner’s EI, while Neglect and Exit – negatively. For reasons already stated

above, we will not formulate predictions regarding the Loyalty strategy.

If EI is indeed a factor determining an “intelligent” choice of partner, as some would claim (Amitay & Mongrain, 2007), then we would expect a positive assortative mating effect to emerge. Therefore, we also assume that (H4) both partners’ EI levels are positively intercorrelated.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study employed a matched-pairs couples design (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Subjects qualified for the study if they had been involved in an intimate relationship for a minimum of one year. Participants were 164 heterosexual Caucasian couples (N = 328 individuals). The mean age of the participants was 28.4 years (SD = 10.2); 40% of the couples were married.

### Measures

**Emotional intelligence.** EI was measured using TIE - the Emotional Intelligence Test (Śmieja, Orzechowski, & Beauvale, 2007). This 24-item ability test was constructed on the basis of Mayer and Salovey’s (1997) four-factor model. Respondents had to read provided descriptions of social interactions and decide how the protagonists of each situation feel, select the most effective mode of conduct, or say which emotions would facilitate and which would interfere with specific task performance. Similarly to the MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2002), expert criteria were employed to determine the correctness of answers. The TIE responses are scored on four scales, consistent with Mayer and Salovey’s (1997) theory: Perception (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .70$ ), Understanding ( $\alpha = .68$ ), Assimilation ( $\alpha = .62$ ), Emotion Management ( $\alpha = .60$ ) and General Score ( $\alpha = .88$ ). TIE is a maximum performance test, measuring actual emotional abilities that are usually considered “ability-based EI”, and in

contrast to self-report measures it is independent of self-esteem processes.

**Problem-solving strategies.** Participants’ styles of reacting to conflict were measured using a scale developed and validated by Kriegerlewicz (2003). Though creation of the Problem-Solving Strategies Inventory (PSSI) draws inspiration from a measure developed by Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Iwaniszek (1986), the questionnaire itself was in fact built from the scratch. The measure has four versions: self-report and a report of perceived partner’s behavior, each for both women and men. Participants rate the frequency of 32 behaviors – eight items for each type of response – on a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = never; 6 = always). Sample items are: for Loyalty, “*If my partner misbehaves towards me I don’t say anything and forgive him/her.*”; for Voice, “*If my opinion differs from my partner’s, I try to discuss it with him/her calmly.*”; for Neglect, “*When I am angry at my partner I ignore him/her for some time.*”; finally, for Exit, “*During arguments I tend to ironically compare my partner to other people we both know*”. It is worth mentioning that items composing Exit in PSSI refer more directly to destructive behavior toward the partner rather than explicit attempts to end the relationship. Cronbach’s alphas for self-reports are .82 (Loyalty), .88 (Voice), .87 (Neglect), and .86 (Exit). These coefficients have a value of .85, .93, .85, and .91, respectively, for perceptions of partner’s behavior.

### Procedure

Couples were tested in home settings. The PSSI self-report was administered first, followed by TIE and PSSI – report of perceived partner’s behavior version. The subjects completed the measures in the same room, in the presence of an experimenter who made certain they were not able to make contact with each other. The response sheets were sealed in an envelope directly after the study so that they could be matched after the data collecting phase.

## RESULTS

**Gender differences in conflict resolution strategies**

Females scored higher on active problem-solving scales (both positive and negative), while males tended to score higher on Loyalty (see Table 1). With regard to partner perceptions of problem-solving strategies, women assessed their male partners more positively (attributing to them: higher Loyalty, lower Exit and Neglect) than males did when describing their female partners' strategies. Additionally, partners were

consistent in self-reports of problem-solving strategies, except of Exit. Regarding between-partner consistency of judgments, we can observe consistency in the case of Voice and Neglect but not in the case of Loyalty and Exit.

**The differences between self-reports and partner-assessed conflict resolution strategies**

Self-reports and partner's perceptions of one's own problem-solving strategies were significantly correlated in all of the PSSI scales, with the exception of females' for Loyalty (see

Table 1 Descriptive statistics, between-group mean comparisons, and Pearson's between partners correlation coefficients N = 164 couples

	Females		Males		t	g <sup>†</sup>	r
	M	SD	M	SD			
Perception	8.05	1.80	7.11	1.88	5.90***	.46	.39***
Understanding	7.47	1.59	6.86	1.54	4.51***	.35	.38***
Assimilation	6.96	1.41	6.55	1.61	3.06**	.24	.34***
Emotion Management	6.64	1.36	5.78	1.45	6.79***	.53	.33***
Total score EI	29.12	5.02	26.29	5.24	7.11***	.56	.51***
Self-reported PSSI							
Voice	34.68	7.09	33.42	6.26	2.00*	.16	.28***
Loyalty	24.98	5.24	30.89	4.67	-11.59***	-.90	.13*
Exit	22.49	6.76	20.57	5.75	2.93**	.23	.10
Neglect	23.30	7.31	22.04	6.27	1.81	.14	.15*
Partner-perceived PSSI							
Voice	30.85	6.99	32.08	7.76	-1.57	-.12	.08
Loyalty	28.48	5.28	30.34	5.74	-3.34**	-.26	.16*
Exit	23.28	7.40	21.55	7.59	2.34*	.20	.21**
Neglect	24.65	6.99	20.86	8.18	4.59**	.40	.03

*Note.* The dependent t tests are paired samples comparisons of female versus male means, df = 163. The t-tests were two-tailed, while the r-Pearson correlations were one-tailed.

<sup>†</sup> Hedges' g - an effect size measure. The method of calculating effect size for dependent samples is based on a work by King and Minium (2003).

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

Table 2 Mean comparisons, effect size estimations and correlation coefficients between self-reports and partner-perceived problem solving strategies, N = 164 couples

	Self-report		Partner-perceived		t	g	r
	M	SD	M	SD			
<b>Female's PSSI</b>							
Voice	34.68	7.09	30.85	6.99	5.52***	0,43	.20**
Loyalty	24.98	5.24	28.48	5.28	-6.14***	-0,48	.04
Exit	22.49	6.76	23.28	7.40	-1.15	-0,09	.23**
Neglect	23.30	7.31	24.65	6.99	-1.97*	-0,15	.24**
<b>Male's PSSI</b>							
Voice	33.42	6.26	32.08	7.76	1.89	0,15	.17*
Loyalty	30.89	4.67	30.34	5.74	1.08	0,08	.23**
Exit	20.57	5.75	21.55	7.59	-1.48	-0,12	.20**
Neglect	22.04	6.27	20.86	8.18	1.63	0,13	.21**

*Note.* The dependent t tests are paired samples comparisons of self-reported versus partner-perceived problem-solving strategies,  $df = 163$ . The t-tests were two-tailed, while the r-Pearson correlations were one-tailed.

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

Table 2). However, these correlations were not particularly strong, suggesting a low level of correspondence between self-reports and partners' perceptions. In order to obtain a more precise assessment of relationships between self-reports and partners' perceptions, we conducted t-test comparisons between self-descriptions and judgments provided by partners (separately for men and women). As we can see, (Table 2), male partners' self-reports and their female counterparts' assessments did not differ at all. As for women, they were seen by their partners as employing Loyalty and Neglect strategies more often than they had reported themselves. Male partners tended to underestimate how often their female counterparts' employed Voice in comparison to the females' self-reports.

### **Emotional Intelligence and problem solving strategies**

Females scored higher than males in both branch scores and total score of TIE (see Table 3),

which is consistent with the data obtained across available literature (e.g., Van Rooy, Alonso, & Viswesvaran, 2005). The correlation analyses revealed that EI is much stronger and more consistently related to women's estimation of problem-solving strategies, regardless of whether we consider self-reports or the estimations of their male partners. In concordance with Hypothesis 1, women's EI was consistently (all branches and total score) and positively related to their own reports of Voice, which confirms that emotional abilities facilitate or enable more positive and active problem-solving. This relationship was not found among men. As expected by Hypothesis 2, females' EI was negatively related to their self-reports of Neglect and Exit. Again, similar effects did not appear in male participants: their self-perceived conflict resolution styles were independent of their EI. Interestingly, female partners' estimates of a male partner conflict resolution style were significantly related to the partner's EI. In other words, emotionally

Table 3 Correlation matrix between both partners' EI and their problem-solving strategies, both self-reported and partner-perceived. N = 164 couples

	Female's EI					Male's EI				
	Perc	Under	Assim	Manag	Total	Perc	Under	Assim	Manag	Total
Female's PSSI										
Self-reported										
Voice	.28***	.22**	.17*	.29***	.30***	.10	.13	.26**	.20**	.21**
Loyalty	.07	.02	.03	-.06	.02	-.06	.01	.03	.07	.01
Exit	-.20**	-.19**	-.14*	-.20**	-.23**	-.21**	-.24**	-.19**	-.23**	-.27***
Neglect	-.30***	-.20**	-.23**	-.28***	-.31***	-.32***	-.24**	-.29***	-.27***	-.35***
Partner-estimated										
Voice	.07	.09	.05	-.05	.05	.08	.02	.02	-.15*†	-.01
Loyalty	.09	.10	.08	-.02	.08	.13*	.07	.00	-.05	.05
Exit	-.07	-.16*	-.15*	.00	-.12	-.08	-.13	.02	.08†	-.04
Neglect	-.10	-.11	-.08	-.03	-.10	.01	-.01	.00	.09†	.02
Male's PSSI										
Self-reported										
Voice	.06	-.04	.09	.00	.03	.09	.01	.15*	-.05	.07
Loyalty	.08	-.01	.04	.05	.05	.07	-.02	.14*	.08	.08
Exit	-.01	.03	-.07	-.06	-.03	.01	-.02	-.03	.06	.01
Neglect	-.15*	-.09	-.22**	-.15*	-.18**	-.07	-.10	-.11	-.03	-.09
Partner-estimated										
Voice	.16*	.16*	.09	.18*	.18*	.03	.12	.15*	.10	.12
Loyalty	.27***	.27***	.18*	.27***	.30***	.07	.12	.16*	.16*	.15*
Exit	-.28***	-.29***	-.18*	-.31***	-.33***	-.15*	-.13*	-.17*	-.19**	-.20**
Neglect	-.28***	-.31***	-.19*	-.24**	-.31***	-.22**	-.18*	-.25**	-.17*	-.26**

Note. Perc – Perception of emotion, Under – Understanding of emotion, Assim – Assimilation of emotion, Manag – Emotional management, Total – Total EI score. Actor effects are shadowed in grey, partner effects are left on a white background.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (onetailed).

† significant correlation, but in opposite direction to predicted, thus we cannot acknowledge their significance while onetailed correlations were applied.

intelligent men did not declare using more constructive or positive conflict resolution styles, but their female partners judged them as being prone to doing so.

High-EI women tend to use Voice and perceive their partner as more loyal. These tendencies were not confirmed in men's estimations: the partners of high EI women neither reported higher Loyalty nor assessed their female partners as more inclined to use Voice. Additionally, high-EI women judged their partners as more

predisposed to use Voice, which again was not confirmed in men's self-reports.

No significant actor effects were found for women's EI on their self-reported and partner-estimated loyalty. With regard to male's EI, only assimilation of emotion proved significant for problem solving, enhancing both one's own Voice and Loyalty (actor effects) and female partner's self-reported Voice.

Our third hypothesis stated that partners of individuals who demonstrate higher EI should use

more constrictive and positive conflict resolution strategies. From the female participants' point of view this really was the case: the higher the EI of the woman, the more constructive and positive are, in her opinion, the conflict-resolution styles employed by her partner. When we look at the data from the male self-report, this effect fades – partners of emotionally intelligent women concede only to less frequent usage of Neglect. With respect to male EI, the situation is analogical. There is a significant relationship between the EI of men and the styles of conflict resolution their female partners employ: the higher EI of the man, the more frequently his partner uses Voice and the less frequently – Exit and Neglect. However, these results were obtained while analyzing female self-reports. When we looked at how men perceive their partners, the effect disappears again. Men high in emotional intelligence did not assess their partners as more constructive and/or positive in conflicts.

Finally, correlation analyses fully confirmed hypothesis 4, which predicted a positive assortative mating effect with regard to EI (see Table 1). Results obtained in the previous matched-couple study in which TIE was used (Stolarski & Postek, 2011) proved replicable, therefore providing further evidence for the claim that people tend to choose a partner with similar emotional abilities.

## DISCUSSION

This study attempted to investigate how emotional intelligence affects the use of specific conflict solving strategies in couples. We assumed that individuals high in EI should have superior conflict resolution skills and engage in strategies in which emotions are respected and controlled. In the course of statistical analyses most of our initial hypotheses were confirmed. In accordance with hypothesis 1, we found that emotional abilities indeed play a significant role in positive and active problem-solving (but

only in women). In men, only the assimilation branch showed consistent relationships with that strategy. With regard to Neglect, the results were similar: female's EI was related to less frequent usage of the strategy, while male's records did not show a significant relationship. Generally, if we had conducted our analyses on the data obtained solely from women, all of the hypotheses would have been supported; if we had done the opposite – almost none. There are at least two possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, it is possible that EI affects conflict resolution styles only in women, while in men emotional abilities are not related to their interpersonal behavior. It would mean that gender is a moderating variable that moderates the association between EI and conflict resolution style. A second explanation could be that EI influences conflict resolution styles of both genders, but only women can recognize it. That would indicate that women are better in judging their partner's conflict resolution styles, because EI in our study was measured by an ability test and not by a self-assessment tool. If the first interpretation is more accurate, we should have discovered a significant correlation between female EI and conflict resolution style, both in self-reports and assessments made by partners. Furthermore, no significant relationships between male EI and conflict resolution style should be found again in self-reports and partners' assessments. However, we did not find anything like that. A potential, albeit perhaps too far-fetched alternative explanation for this puzzling effect is that women see things that are invisible to men. If we assume this is the case, another question arises: does it mean that they are more accurate and realistic in understanding the partner's actual qualities, or are their perceptions biased? Our findings show that male partners' self-reports of conflict resolution strategies and their female counterparts assessments do not differ at any significant level. It means that there is no general tendency among women to idealize their male partner. But the more emotionally



intelligent a man is, the more positively his conflict style is assessed by women. It proves that the women's assessments are anchored in reality – men who possess emotional abilities are judged as more loyal and less prone to neglect or exit the relationship. Smith, Ciarrochi and Heaven (2008) identified a similar effect in relation to conflict communication patterns. They found that decreases in female and male relationship satisfaction were predicted only by women's (and not men's) reports of avoidance and withholding communication. In fact, the majority of research proves that women possess more relationship awareness than men do (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Women form more differentiated and complex cognitive representation of relationships events. They remember prior intimate experiences with more vividness, in more detail, and with greater accuracy (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994). Due to their greater relationship awareness, they can see connections among events that are not observable by men. For example, divorcing men are eight to 10 times more likely than their wives to say that they do not know why their marriage ended (Kitson, 1992). Our findings seem to be in line with this previous work, suggesting that female participants of the current study were not biased, but more conscious of their partner's behaviors.

Moreover, our research shows that the more emotionally intelligent a woman is, the more favorably she perceives her partner. This finding suggests that emotionally intelligent women develop more generous and idealized images of their significant others. Research on these types of positive illusions (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2003) shows that, over the longer term, it has positive consequences. Partners who sustain positive illusions report less conflict and greater satisfaction in their relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). What is more, positive illusions have also a self-fulfilling effect: over the year, romantic partners see the same virtues in themselves as their partner initially perceived

in them. Our results imply that the high EI of a woman increases her tendency to maintain positive illusions. In summation, the fact that women recognize their emotionally intelligent partners as more positive and constructive in conflicts is a reflection of those partners' actual qualities (not all men are judged so favorably) and also their own EI, which amplifies the tendency to idealize their partner.

Through employing a matched-pair couples design, we were able to discover some interesting additional results. The current study shows that men perceive women as less 'active' than they recognize themselves (Voice strategy was reported by men to be used less often by women than in women's self-reports). Do men overestimate their female partners' tendency to behave in a 'passive' way, or, conversely, do women show the tendency to report less 'passive' behaviors than they actually exhibit? One readily available explanation for this is that women are and feel (even if only unconsciously) expected to be the 'caring' part of a relationship, responsible for its course, solving problems, and maintaining attachment. Previous work (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Denton & Burlison, 2007) indicates that women are indeed more likely to raise relationship concerns and to guide discussions about areas of disagreement. When a relationship problem appears, men are less likely than women to engage in effectively solving the problem (Miller & Perlman, 2009), while women tend to be the initiators of discussions (Ball, Cowan & Cowan, 1995). This tendency also emerged in our study. As we noted before, resolution strategies applied in conflict by emotionally intelligent men have been favorably assessed by their female partners. However, a closer look at that data reveals that in fact male counterparts were judged as less actively destructive (Exit and Neglect) and more passively constrictive (Loyalty) than actively constructive (Voice). In light of these findings, female self-reports in our study seem more reliable than their partner-assessments. Why

then would men tend to describe women as less 'active'? One possible explanation is that they hold higher expectations in this area. Gender role norms state that men need not engage as actively in the conflict discussion (Powers et al., 2006). Usually, girls are encouraged to be communal and expressive, while boys are expected to be independent and autonomous. Hence, men may assume that women should be the 'emotional experts' in a relationship, and it is difficult for women to meet those expectations. Another reason for men to describe women as more 'passive' is they are on alert for signs of passiveness from their partners.

### Conclusions

Our study proves that women use more active strategies of conflict-resolution and reveal stronger tendencies to perceive their partner in a positive light. These findings are consistent with previous evidence on female patterns of relationship behavior. An additional strength of the current study is finding a significant moderating role of EI in that processes. As we demonstrated above, emotionally intelligent women use more active and constructive styles of conflict resolution and perceive their partners as behaving in a similarly positive way. Emotionally intelligent men tend to have partners who use more active and positive strategies, and who appreciate their conflict-resolution abilities. Unfortunately, they can't see it.

### Limitations and future directions

The vast majority of empirical work in the domain of individual differences in relationships is based on self-reports. An undeniable advantage of our study is use of an objective ability measure of EI. As a result, we did not correlate two tests based on self-esteem and avoided all the interpretational problems this methodology usually brings about. It has to be emphasized that our sample was larger than in analogical studies (e.g., Brackett et al., 2005; Zeidner &

Kaluda, 2008), which makes the present study more reliable. Moreover, the fact that both self- and partner-reports were applied strengthens the objectiveness of this study.

Despite those considerable strengths, it is important to be aware of several limitations. One limitation is that our research was focused on young couples, and we do not know whether obtained findings would be analogical for older couples in longer, more committed relationships. Moreover, few post-hoc formulated hypotheses (particularly the one about higher women's efficiency in perceiving male partners' behaviors) seem very difficult to verify empirically. One of the possible solutions that seem interesting and could be applied in further studies amounts to using an external observer's judgment (e.g., couple therapist). Such a procedure would finally resolve the issue whether men or women are biased in their perceptions of their partner's behavior.

It would be valuable to replicate the current findings in a diary study. By using PSSI, we base our data on declarations which are susceptible to biases caused by motivation and active memory reconstruction processes. Regular and precise reports from diaries might be a better source of that kind of information.

Whether the influence of EI levels on conflict resolution strategies is additive, coincidental, compensatory, or multiplicative in character remains to be tested, as does the mediating role of conflict resolution patterns between EI and relationship satisfaction. Other interesting idea for further research is to verify whether training programs developing emotional abilities (e.g., Nelis, Quoidbach, Mikolajczak & Hansenne, 2009) would result in more adaptive conflict resolution in couples.

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