Conflict Engagement Post Deployment: Understanding and Perceived Similarity

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Abstract

We utilized post-deployment data from male National Guard members and their wives (*N* = 99 couples) to evaluate actor and partner associations between markers of perceptual congruence (i.e., understanding and perceived similarity) in conflict engagement and relationship satisfaction. Results indicated that, controlling for relationship length and both service members' and their wives' self-reported conflict engagement, wives' understanding of service members and perceived similarity to service members were each positively associated with both their own relationship satisfaction and service members' relationship satisfaction.

Introduction

- Relational stressors associated with deployment (e.g., concern about infidelity) have interfered with spouses' ability to effectively manage conflict during reintegration (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). Given that military couples' conflict resolution likely predicts marital satisfaction and longevity (Karney & Crown, 2007), we examined destructive conflict engagement and its association with relationship satisfaction during reintegration.

- However, we aimed to evaluate the role of two markers of perceptual congruence in conflict engagement that have been positively associated with marital satisfaction above and beyond spousal behaviors (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993), namely *understanding* (the degree to which one spouse accurately perceives the other spouse's behavior) and *perceived similarity* (the degree to which one spouse perceives that the other spouse's behavior is similar to one's own). The figure below illustrates how these markers are calculated.
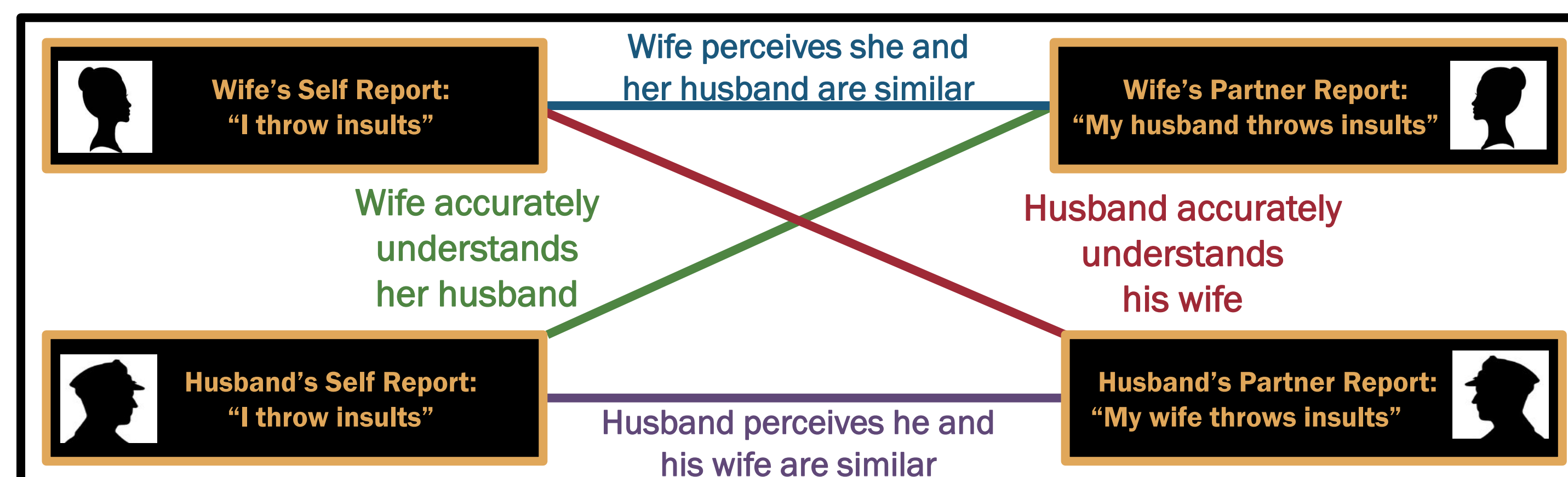
- Existing research has largely focused on newlyweds, as spouses likely formulate shared perceptions during the early years of marriage (Acitelli et al., 1993). During reintegration, however, military couples may similarly be tasked with reformulating shared perceptions as they reacquaint themselves (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). Thus, in light of research with newlyweds documenting positive actor and partner associations between markers of perceptual congruence and marital satisfaction (Acitelli et al., 1993), we hypothesized that husbands and wives will each be more satisfied in their relationships when:

- **Hypothesis 1 (actor associations):** They more accurately understand their spouses and when they perceive that they are more similar to their spouses.

- **Hypothesis 2 (partner associations):** Their spouses more accurately understand them and when their spouses perceive that they are more similar to them.

Method

- Data were collected an average of 10.10 weeks after service members returned home.
- Service members were male (*M age* = 33) and significant others were female (*M age* = 31).
- Most service members were enlisted (72.2%) and served for an average of 10.48 years.
- Couples were together an average of 8.87 years and had about 2 (*M* = 2.16) children.

Method (cont'd.)

Key Study Variables:		Significant Others (Wives)		Service Members (Husbands)	
	Range	M	SD	M	SD
Self-reported Conflict Engagement	1 – 5	1.83	.62	1.59	.52
Understanding	0 – 4	3.39	.45	3.34	.50
Perceived Similarity	0 – 4	3.52	.42	3.54	.56
Relationship Satisfaction	1 – 10	8.06	1.56	8.28	1.43

- **Conflict Engagement:** Subscale from the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (Kurdek, 1994): *launch attacks, explode, say things that aren't meant, and throw insults*. On a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), participants first indicated how often they used each behavior (self report) and then how often their spouse used each behavior (partner report).

- **Understanding (or accuracy):** Absolute value of the difference between one spouse's self report and the other spouse's partner report; higher values represent higher levels of understanding.

- **Perceived Similarity:** Absolute value of the difference between one spouse's self report and partner report; higher values represent higher levels of perceived similarity.

- **Relationship Satisfaction:** Self-reported relationship happiness on a scale ranging from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*very happy*) (Locke & Wallace, 1959).
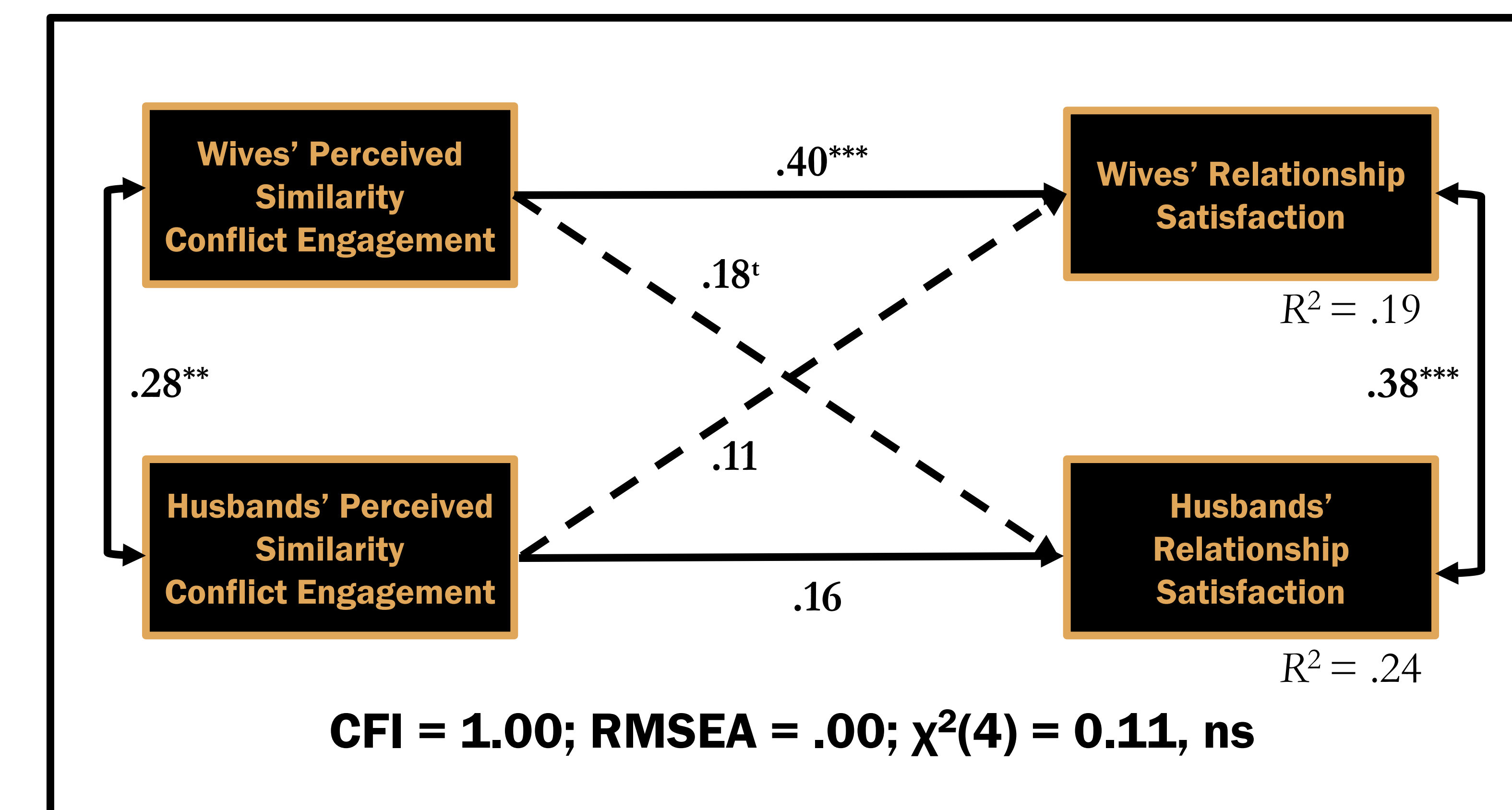
Results: Understanding (*N* = 99)
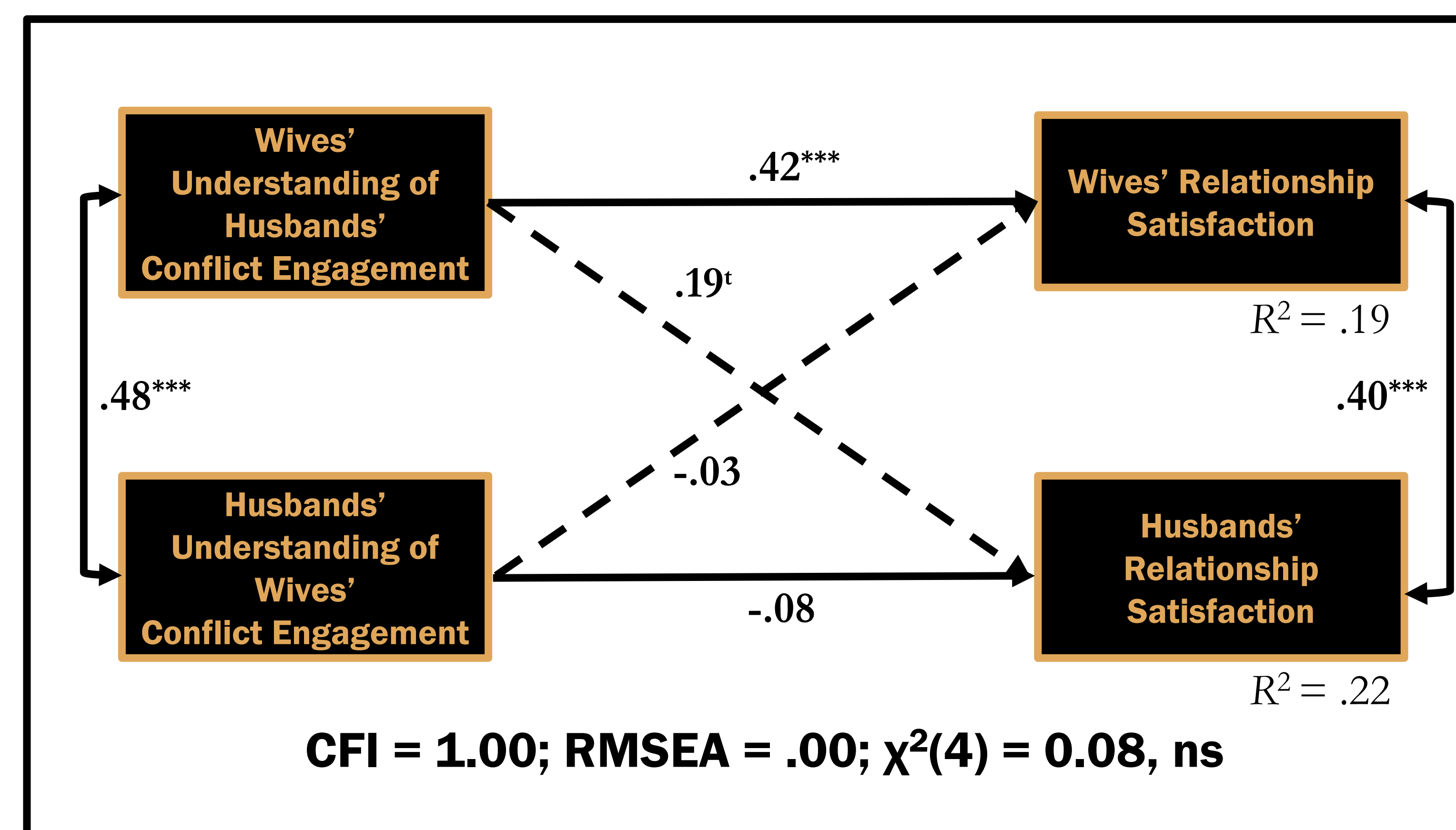
CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00; χ²(4) = 0.08, ns

Note. Model controlled for relationship length and self-reported conflict engagement; Dashed lines = partner effects; Non-significant correlations with relationship length were constrained to 0; $^t p$ < .10; $^{***}p$ < .001.

- Consistent with hypothesis 1, wives' understanding of their husbands was positively associated with their own satisfaction.
- Consistent with hypothesis 2, wives' understanding of their husbands was positively associated with husbands' satisfaction (at the level of a trend).

Results: Perceived Similarity (*N* = 99)

CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00; χ²(4) = 0.11, ns

Note. Model controlled for relationship length and self-reported conflict engagement; Dashed lines = partner effects; Non-significant correlations with relationship length were constrained to 0; $^t p$ < .10; $^{**}p$ < .01; $^{***}p$ < .001.

- Consistent with hypothesis 1, wives' perceived similarity was positively associated with their own satisfaction.
- Consistent with hypothesis 2, wives' perceived similarity was positively associated with their husbands' satisfaction (at the level of a trend).

Conclusions

- **Actor Associations:** Wives' relationship satisfaction was positively associated with their own understanding and perceived similarity. It may be that understanding their husbands' (i.e., service members') negative conflict behavior post-deployment was beneficial for wives because it gave them a sense of control (Acitelli et al., 1993). Perceived similarity of negative conflict behavior may have protected wives' self-esteem or even promoted a sense of equity within their relationships.

- **Partner Associations:** Husbands' (i.e., service members') relationship satisfaction was positively associated with their wives' (rather than their own) understanding and perceived similarity (trend-level). These associations raise the question of whether wives who more accurately understood their husbands—or viewed themselves as more similar to their husbands—communicated with their husbands in characteristically different ways, perhaps with higher levels of empathy or lower levels of criticism. Future research ought to identify such mediating mechanisms.

References

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