Journal of Family Psychology

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Emily J. Cross, Nickola C. Overall, Rachel S. T. Low, and Annette M. E. Henderson

Online First Publication, October 19, 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000812

CITATION

Cross, E. J., Overall, N. C., Low, R. S. T., & Henderson, A. M. E. (2020, October 19). Relationship Problems, Agreement and Bias in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness, and Family Functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000812

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Journal of Family Psychology

© 2020 American Psychological Association
ISSN: 0893-3200

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000812

Relationship Problems, Agreement and Bias in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness, and Family Functioning

Emily J. Cross, Nickola C. Overall, Rachel S. T. Low, and Annette M. E. Henderson
University of Auckland

The current study examined whether couples' relationship problems negatively influenced perceptions of partners' parenting and, in turn, undermined family functioning. Couples ($N = 96$) completed assessments of relationship problems and family chaos before participating in a family play activity with their 4- to 5-year-old child. Parents reported on their own and their partner's responsiveness toward their child and how much the interaction was a positive and connected family experience. Objective observers also rated each parent's responsiveness toward their child. Parents completed measures assessing family chaos 1 year later. Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were significantly associated with both partners' self-reported and observers' ratings of partners' parental responsiveness, but such levels of relative agreement were modest. After accounting for agreement, perceptions of parental responsiveness was shaped by 2 sources of bias: (a) Parents who felt that they were less versus more responsive to their child viewed their partners as less versus more responsive as a parent (*assumed similarity*), and (b) parents who experienced greater relationship problems perceived their partner to be less responsive as a parent (*relationship bias*). Perceiving partners to be a less responsive parent, in turn, predicted (a) feeling less connected as a family during the interaction and residual increases in family chaos 1 year later. The results indicate that couples' relationship problems spill over to bias perceptions of parenting, which interferes with couples' ability to provide a connected, stable, and secure family environment. The results highlight that perceptual processes are important in understanding and addressing the ways couples' problems spill over across family subsystems.

Keywords: perceptions of parenting, relationship problems, agreement, bias, family chaos

Supplemental materials: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000812.supp

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Family-systems perspectives emphasize that problematic dynamics in one family relationship can create problems in other family relationships, which creates and reinforces problematic dynamics across the family system (Cox & Paley, 1997). A poignant example is how marital conflict spills over to affect parent–child relationships and, in turn, children's adjustment (Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 2002). Prior investigations have amassed considerable evidence that a range of problems in couples' relationships create problems in how parents respond to their children (Erel & Burman, 1995; Sturge-Apple, Skibo, & Davies, 2012). In the current research, we examined one overlooked perceptual process in these system links. Given that relationships across different family members are central to the functioning of the whole family system, *perceptions* of how one family member behaves toward another should also (a) be influenced by perceivers' problems with that family member and, in turn, (b) influence the quality of wider family interactions. Applying this family-systems perspective to how couples' relationship problems spill over to parenting and family functioning, we proposed that (a) greater problems in couples' relationships should predict more negative perceptions of partners' parenting, and (b) such negative perceptions should undermine parents' ability to work together to provide a connected and stable family environment. We tested these proposed links by assessing agreement and bias in perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness during couples' interactions with their child and, in turn, family connection during the interaction and family functioning in the home 1 year later.

Agreement and Bias in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness

The way couples' relationships influence perceptions of parenting, and the role of perceived parenting in shaping family dynamics, has been surprisingly understudied (see Gallegos, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2020). The dearth of prior theoretical and empirical work offers an open base on which to found our investigation and leaves several foundational questions regarding perceptions of parenting unanswered. By contrast, investigations of factors that shape perceptions of partners' responses toward the self have a long history, with established models for testing how relationship problems influence or bias perceptions of partners' parenting (Fletcher &

Emily J. Cross, Nickola C. Overall, Rachel S. T. Low, and Annette M. E. Henderson, School of Psychology, University of Auckland.

To date, data and ideas from this project have not been published or presented elsewhere.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily J. Cross, School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand. E-mail: cross.emily.jane@gmail.com

Kerr, 2010; Gagné & Lydon, 2004; West & Kenny, 2011). These established models specify that to test our first proposition—that relationship problems lead to more negative perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness—we need to account for (a) agreement in perceptions of partners' parenting and (b) assumed similarity in parenting across partners. The following section details these components, drawing on couples and family theory and research to consider three novel, as-yet-untested, questions regarding agreement and bias in perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness during family interactions (see Figure 1).

Do Parents Agree About Each Other's Parental Responsiveness?

Relative agreement, often referred to as *accuracy* in the social perception literature (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; West & Kenny, 2011), is indexed by the degree to which perceptions of partners' responsiveness are associated with partners' reports of their responsiveness (relative agreement path, Figure 1). For example, people's perceptions of how responsive (understanding, caring, validating) partners are toward them are associated with partners' reports of how responsive they are (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007). However, perceiver and partner reports tend to show only moderate agreement (meta-analytic r = .40; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010), indicating that judgments of partner behaviors are also shaped or biased by other factors (see also Sillars, 2011). Applying these established effects to our novel focus on perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness (warmth, support, engagement toward children), we expected only moderate agreement between perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness and partners' own reported parental responsiveness. We also expected that, accounting for this agreement, other perceiver factors would influence perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness.

Do Partners See Each Other's Parental Responsiveness as Similar to Their Own?

The most established source of people's perceptions of others, beyond relative agreement, involves people viewing others' behavior as similar to their own—a bias called *assumed similarity* (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Assumed similarity is indexed by how much individuals' own reported responsiveness predicts perceptions of their partners' responsiveness (assumed similarity path, Figure 1). Assumed similarity is considered a bias because it uniformly accounts for variation in perceptions over and above partners' own reported thoughts, feelings, and behavior (see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; West & Kenny, 2011). For example, the more responsive people report being toward their partners, the more people perceive their partners to be responsive (over and above how responsive partners report being), and this bias helps to reinforce mutual responsiveness and security (e.g., Lemay et al., 2007; Lemay & Neal, 2014). We expected a similar process to occur when assessing partners' behavior toward their children—people who feel that they are more versus less responsive to their child will view their partners as more versus less responsive to their child.

Do Couples' Relationship Problems Influence How People Perceive Their Partners' Parental Responsiveness?

Drawing on theory and research from the literature on both close relationships and families, we also expected that problems in couples' relationships would shape perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness. Many investigations of bias in the couples' literature have been guided by the theoretical proposition that relationship difficulties filter the way people perceive, explain, and predict relationship events (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Sillars, 2011).

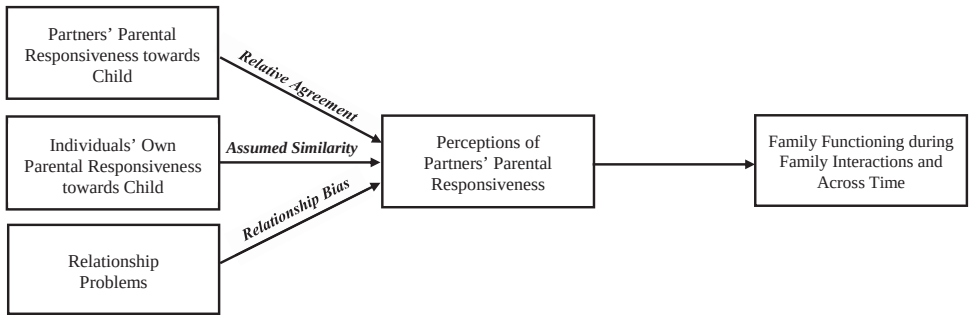

Figure 1. Model showing agreement and bias in perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness during family interactions and the links between perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness and family functioning during family interactions and across time. The *relative agreement* path captures the degree to which individuals' perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness was associated with partners' self-reported parental responsiveness and thus how much couples agreed about partners' relative levels of parental responsiveness. The *assumed similarity* path captures the degree to which individuals' own reported parental responsiveness was associated with perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness and thus how perceivers saw partners' relative levels of parental responsiveness as similar to their own. The *relationship bias* path captures the extent to which perceivers' experienced problems in their relationship with their partner were associated with perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness during the family interaction and thus how much relationship problems spilled over to bias perceptions of partners' responsiveness toward their child. The final path captures the degree to which perceptions of partners' responsiveness predicted problematic family functioning, including connection during the family interaction and family chaos assessed 1 year later.

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For example, after accounting for agreement and assumed similarity, people who are insecure, have pessimistic expectations, or hold negative relationship evaluations perceive their partners as less responsive to the self (e.g., Lemay, 2014; Murray & Holmes, 1997). Broader, family-based investigations have extended this focus on how relationship difficulties shape perceptions and behaviors *within* couples' relationships by showing that couples' problems spill over to other relationships in the family system (Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Cox & Paley, 1997), including undermining effective parenting (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Erel & Burman, 1995; Stroud, Meyers, Wilson, & Durbin, 2015). Integrating and extending these lines of work, we propose that spillover across family subsystems also involves perceptions; problems in one relationship (e.g., problems with a partner) should influence perceptions of other family relationships (e.g., perception of partners' responsiveness toward children).

One recent study drew from family-systems theory to examine how couples' problems spill over to perceptions of parenting. Gallegos et al. (2020) provided evidence that greater observed hostility during couples' marital interactions predicted more negative perceptions of partners' parenting as observed during couples' discussions of parenting. However, because Gallegos et al. (2020) did not directly ask couples to report on their perceptions of parenting, they could not examine agreement or similarity in perceptions of parenting or test whether couples' problematic communication predicted perceptions of partners' parenting independent of agreement and similarity across parents. To assess whether relationship problems bias perceptions of partners' parenting, it is necessary to examine whether relationship problems account for additional variance once both partners' reports of parenting are taken into account (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; West & Kenny, 2011). Otherwise, any link between relationship problems and perceptions of partners' parenting may simply reflect problems across the family system, including poorer parenting as recognized by both parents (agreement) and/or perceivers' evaluations of their own parenting (assumed similarity).

In the current study, we directly tested whether couples' relationship problems predicted more negative perceptions of partners' parenting after accounting for agreement and assumed similarity (see relationship bias pathway, Figure 1). We gathered a comprehensive index of couples' relationship problems using the Marital Problems Inventory (MPI; Geiss & O'Leary, 1981), which assesses the severity of 25 problems couples commonly face in relationships, including poor connection (e.g., lack of loving feelings, sex, spending time together), problematic conflict and power dynamics (e.g., communication, solving problems, power struggles, physical abuse, gender role conflict), insecurity and managing other relationships (e.g., jealousy, in-laws, friends), and problems negotiating personal issues and financial/work stress (see Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Although couples' conflict (hostility, avoidance, frequency) is often assessed in examinations of spillover processes, general relationship quality (indexing adjustment across an array of relationship domains) is an equally or more powerful predictor of outcomes in the family system (van Eldik et al., 2020). Moreover, it is this array of problems that both produces conflict *and* biases perceptions of partners' behavior (e.g., Cross, Overall, Low, & McNulty, 2019; Lemay, 2014; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Fillo, 2015). Accordingly, greater problems across domains is a good indicator that parents are not working well as a connected and cooperative unit within the family system, which should bias the way partners perceive each other across family relationships and contexts, including how responsive they are as parents.

Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness and Family Functioning

The factors that bias perceptions of partners are important because, regardless of agreement and assumed similarity, people's perceptions are what govern the way people behave toward and connect with their partners. Perceptual processes are central to why the difficulties in relationships described previously undermine couple functioning, including producing destructive behavior that confirms negative expectations and damages relationship satisfaction (e.g., Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Lemay et al., 2007; Overall et al., 2015). Indeed Gallegos et al. (2020) found that more negative perceptions of partners' parenting (rated by observers) predicted greater hostility during couples' interactions observed over a year later. Advancing this prior research by taking a broader family perspective beyond the couple, we propose that perceptions of partners' parenting play a critical role in shaping the degree to which parents can work together to provide a connected and stable family environment.

As shown in Figure 1, we examined how perceptions of partners' parenting during family interactions involving both parents and their child were likely to influence both (a) immediate feelings of connectedness during those interactions and (b) the degree to which parents provide a coordinated, stable versus chaotic family environment across time. Regarding immediate effects, we reasoned that perceiving partners to be less versus more responsive toward their child during lab-based family interactions would be associated with perceivers feeling less versus more positive and connected as a family. Perceiving partners to be less responsive as a parent likely signals to the perceiver that the partner is not motivated or engaged to help care for and support their child and may lead people to involve and rely on their partners less when parenting, disengage from their partners rather than coordinating and working together to coparent their child, and feel greater parental burden and responsibility (see McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). All these processes should undermine feelings of family connectedness (Bridgett, Burt, Laake, & Oddi, 2013; Dumas et al., 2005; Feinberg, 2003).

In addition to immediate effects within a given family interaction, if the dynamics within the lab-based family interaction are reflective of processes routinely occur in families (as lab-based observations are assumed to capture [see Sillars & Overall, 2017], and our data suggest is the case; see Footnote 1), then perceptions that partners are less versus more responsive as a parent should predict poorer family functioning across time. We tested this by examining the links between perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness and chaos in the home assessed 1 year later. We focused on home chaos for two reasons. As argued earlier, perceiving partners to be less versus more responsive parents should undermine versus facilitate couples' ability to work together to create a coordinated and stable family environment (see Corapci & Wachs, 2002; Dumas et al., 2005). Moreover, a bulk of research has shown that more chaotic home environments (less stable,

predictable, and organized) have a detrimental impact on children's development. For example, greater home chaos has been linked to poorer cognitive, behavioral, academic, and self-regulatory outcomes in children (Coldwell, Pike, & Dunn, 2006; Deater-Deckard et al., 2009; Vernon-Feagans, Willoughby, & Garret-Petters et al., 2016).

Current Research

The current investigation examined a novel set of questions involving (a) testing whether partners agree about each other's parental responsiveness; (b) identifying factors that shape perceptions of parenting, including whether couples' relationship problems spill over to bias perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness; and (c) examining how perceptions of parental responsiveness, in turn, influence family functioning (see Figure 1). To examine these family processes, both parents completed background measures assessing relationship problems and family chaos in the home and then attended a lab-based session with their 5-year-old child, which involved a family play activity with the child. This family interaction was designed to offer families the opportunity to have a fun, positive, high-quality family interaction in which they felt connected and engaged together. Both parents reported on their own and their partner's responsiveness toward their child during the family interaction and how much the interaction involved a positive, connected family experience. Independent observers also rated each parent's responsiveness toward their child. One year later, parents completed repeated assessments of relationship problems and family chaos.

Our predictions are shown in Figure 1. Based on the typical levels of agreement and bias shown in close relationships (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Sillars, 2011), we expected that parents would only moderately agree about each other's parental responsiveness (*relative agreement* path). After accounting for agreement, we expected that perceptions of parental responsiveness would be shaped by two sources of bias: (a) Parents who feel that they are less versus more responsive to their child would view their partners as less versus more responsive to their child (*assumed similarity* path), and (b) parents who experience greater versus lower relationship problems would perceive their partner to be less versus more responsive toward their child (*relationship bias* path). Illustrating the importance of these perceptions for family functioning, we predicted that perceiving partners to be a less responsive parent would be associated with (a) a less connected family experience during the interaction and (b) more family chaos 1 year after the lab visit. Finally, we conducted extensive additional analyses to show that these associations were independent of a range of alternatives (detailed later in the article).

Method

Participants

Families responded to advertisements for participation posted at parenting events and in parenting newsletters. Eligible families included cohabiting parents who spoke fluent English and whose 5-year old child (specified to be between 4.5 and 5.5 years) had *not* been diagnosed with a social or cognitive impairment. Focusing on this specific child age range ensured we captured a similar parenting context across families and addressed additional aims involving assessing socioemotional competence during the transition to school (see the online supplemental materials). A target sample size of 100 families balanced power considerations with the time and resource-intensive nature of the study (see online supplemental materials). Active recruitment stopped after the 100th family. Of the 104 families who participated, 8 families were excluded because of incomplete measures. Families received $100NZD for completing an initial lab-based session, and then $30 (for both parents, $10 if only 1 parent) for completing a 20-min online questionnaire 1 year later. Of the 192 parents (from 96 families), 131 parents (71 mothers/60 fathers) completed the follow-up measure for this study (an attrition rate that is common in longitudinal dyad studies; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Parents who completed versus did not complete the follow-up did not differ on any of the main variables at the initial session (see the online supplemental materials), but we recognize that attrition reduced sample size and thus may have limited power to reliably detect longitudinal effects. See the online supplemental materials for more sample details.

Procedure

The study was approved by the departmental ethics committee at the University of Auckland (Ethnics 012621). All participants provided informed consent. Both parents independently completed an online questionnaire assessing demographic information, parenting attitudes, child temperament, and home chaos. Parents then attended a laboratory session with their child. While their child completed other tasks in a separate room, parents independently completed measures of relationship problems. Parents then had a 7-min video-recorded discussion about a serious relationship conflict (see the online supplemental materials for details). Parents were then reunited with their child, provided with paper materials and stationery, and asked to work together as a family to build a free-standing tower. After the 10-min family activity, both parents rated their own and their partners' responsiveness toward their child and how much the interaction was a positive and connected family experience. Parents were contacted via e-mail 1 year later and asked to complete an online questionnaire assessing home chaos and relationship problems.

Measures

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations. All measures were assessed on scales from 1 to 7, and items were averaged to construct scale scores.

Relationship problems. At the initial session and 1 year later, parents completed the MPI (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981), rating a list of 25 common relationship problems (e.g., "communication," "solving problems," "affection") according to how serious each problem was (1 = *not a problem*, 7 = *major problem*). The MPI is often summed, but high internal consistency (see Table 1) revealed that couples tended to experience lower or higher problems across relationship domains. Thus, we averaged across items so that the measures of relationship problems were on a comparable scale to all other measures.

Own and partners' parental responsiveness. Immediately following the family interaction, parents rated four items adapted from previous theory and research (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Wa-

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations Across Primary Measures

Variables	*M*	*SD*	α	Correlations 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Relationship and family background assessments												
1. Relationship problems	2.36	0.67	.86	**.42****	.39**	−.31**	−.15*	−.08	−.13	−.22**	.20**	.62**
2. Family chaos (Time 1)	3.26	0.83	.84		**.46****	−.21**	−.21**	−.22**	.03	−.16*	.73**	.30**
Parental responsiveness during family interactions												
3. Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness	6.22	0.94	.90			**.20****	.50**	.46**	.35**	.66**	−.28**	−.34**
4. Individuals' self-reported parental responsiveness	5.94	1.00	.89				**.25****	.25**	−.09	.55**	−.24**	−.25**
5. Partners' self-reported parental responsiveness	5.94	1.00	.89					**.25****	.29**	.09**	−.22*	−.03
6. Observers' ratings of partners' parental responsiveness	4.16	1.21	.95						**.14**	.08	−.04	−.21*
Family functioning and longitudinal assessments												
7. Family connection during family interaction	6.38	0.84	.94							**.31****	−.19*	−.26**
8. Family chaos (Time 2)	3.21	0.91	.87								**.50****	.30**
9. Relationship problems (Time 2)	2.32	0.79	.90									**.51****

Note. All measures were assessed on a scale from 1 to 7. All reliabilities represent Cronbach's α. Correlations in bold represent correlations across partners. The Time 1 assessments included data from 192 parents (from 96 heterosexual couples). The Time 2 assessments included data from 131 parents who provided longitudinal data (71 mothers, 60 fathers).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

ters, & Wall, 1978; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006) to assess their own parental responsiveness toward their child during the interaction: "I was involved/engaged with my child during the play activity," "I was warm/affectionate towards my child," "I supported and helped my child," and "I was responsive to my child's needs" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Parents also rated analogous items to assess their perception of partners' parental responsiveness (e.g., "My partner was responsive to my child's needs").

Observed parental responsiveness. Three trained coders independently rated how much each parent exhibited four categories of behavior (Biringen, Robinson, & Emde, 2000; Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008): warmth (affection, warmth, support), engagement (engagement, involvement with child), contingent responding (responding contingent to child's cues/needs), and respect for child's autonomy (encouraging, acknowledging child's perspective). Coders considered the duration, frequency, and intensity of relevant verbal and nonverbal behavior across the entire 10-min interaction (*low* = 1–2, *moderate* = 3–5, *high* = 6–7). See the online supplemental materials for details. Coders' ratings were reliable (interclass correlation coefficients [ICCs] = .90–.96) and were averaged within and then across categories.

Family connectedness. After the family interaction, parents rated three items: "We had good quality family time," "We had a fun and positive family experience," and "We were connected as a family" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Family chaos. Before attending the session and then again 1 year following the lab visit, parents completed the 15-item Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny, Wachs, Ludwig, & Phillips, 1995, e.g., "There is often a fuss going on at our home," "No matter what our family plans, it usually doesn't seem to work out"; 1 = *not at all like your own home*, 7 = *Very much like your own home*). Higher scores represent more disorganized, chaotic home environments.

Additional measures. To distinguish processes regarding parental responsiveness from responsiveness within couples' relationships, we gathered self-reports and observer ratings of partners' responsiveness to the self. Parents rated how responsive they felt their partner was to them (rather than the child) after (a) the couples' discussion and (b) the family interaction (seven items; e.g., "I felt understood/validated by my partner," "I felt accepted/valued by my partner;" Reis & Gable, 2015). Two different teams of coders rated the degree to which partners (a) were "understanding," "validating," and "caring" during couples' conflict discussions (ICCs = .90–.94) and (b) expressed warmth, responsiveness, and regard to their partner during the family interaction (ICCs = .83). Parents also completed established measures of authoritarian and authoritative parenting (O'Reilly & Peterson, 2014), and child

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temperament (effortful control, negative affectivity, surgency/extraversion; Putnam & Rothbart, 2006). See the online supplemental materials for more details on the measures used to test alternative explanations.

Results

Agreement and Bias in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness

As shown in Table 1, greater relationship problems were associated with lower perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness during the family interaction. As detailed earlier, however, testing whether relationship problems influence or bias perceptions of partners' parenting requires testing whether problems predict perceptions of partners' responsiveness while accounting for agreement and similarity across partners (West & Kenny, 2011). We tested the relative agreement, assumed similarity, and relationship bias paths outlined in Figure 1 in one dyadic, multilevel analysis. All of our dyadic analyses applied the procedures and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) syntax provided by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), which treats perceivers' and partners' scores as repeated measures within the dyad and accounts for nonindependence by modeling a heterogeneous compound-symmetry error structure (see online supplemental materials for annotated syntax). Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were regressed on (a) partners' self-reported parental responsiveness (assessing relative agreement across partners), (b) perceivers' reports of their own parental responsiveness (assessing how much perceivers saw their partners' levels of responsiveness as similar to their own; assumed similarity), and (c) perceivers' relationship problems (assessing whether greater relationship problems predicted more negative perceptions of partners' responsiveness while accounting for agreement and assumed similarity; relationship bias). We modeled the main and interaction effects of parent gender to test whether any effects differed across mothers and fathers (coded −1 vs. 1, respectively).

Table 2 presents the results (Primary Analyses: Paths in Figure 1). Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were significantly predicted by partners' self-reported parental responsiveness, aligning with typical levels of agreement within close relationships (meta-analytic $r = .40$; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). Revealing higher levels of assumed similarity, perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were more strongly predicted by individuals' reports of their own parental responsiveness. Parents who reported being more (vs. less) responsive toward their child during the family task also perceived their partner to be more (vs. less) responsive toward their child. The only significant gender difference emerged here: Assumed similarity was stronger for mothers compared with fathers (see gender difference column and note in Table 2). Finally, accounting for agreement and assumed similarity, greater relationship problems predicted lower perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness, supporting that couples' problems spill over or bias perceptions of partners' parenting.

The results revealed only modest agreement across partners, providing evidence that additional factors (assumed similarity, relationship problems) were equally predictive of perceptions of partners' parenting. However, tests of agreement and additional factors that bias perceptions may be undermined if partners' reports involve partners' self-serving biases of their own responsiveness (Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Overall et al., 2015). Supplemental analyses (see Table 2) rerunning the models and replacing part-

Table 2
Analyses Testing the Effects of Partners' Parental Responsiveness (Agreement), Individuals' Parental Responsiveness (Assumed Similarity), and Relationship Problems (Relationship Bias) on Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness During Laboratory-Based Family Interactions

Predictors of perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness	*b*	*SE*	95% CI Low	95% CI High	*t*	*p*	*r*	Gender difference *t*	Gender difference *p*	Gender difference *r*
Primary analyses: Paths in Figure 1										
Partners' self-reported parental responsiveness (relative agreement)	.27	.06	.16	.38	4.97***	.00	.38	0.24	.81	.02
Individuals' self-reported parental responsiveness (assumed similarity)	.43	.06	.32	.56	7.46***	.00	.54	−2.89**	.00	.23
Relationship problems (relationship bias)	−.30	.07	−.44	−.17	−4.42***	.00	.36	1.01	.31	.08
Supplemental analyses: Observers' agreement										
Observer-rated partners' parental responsiveness (relative agreement)	.21	.04	.13	.30	5.07***	.00	.40	−0.85	.40	.06
Individuals' self-reported parental responsiveness (assumed similarity)	.57	.05	.47	.68	11.27***	.00	.72	−3.57***	.00	.28
Relationship problems (relationship bias)	−.29	.07	−.43	−.14	−3.99***	.00	.38	0.89	.37	.07

Note. Primary analyses modeled partners' reports of parental responsiveness to assess agreement across partners within relationships. Supplemental analyses compared this level of agreement inside the relationship by modeling observer ratings of partners' parental responsiveness to assess agreement with outside observers. All measures were assessed on a scale from 1 to 7. Gender difference coefficients tested whether the effects significantly differed across mothers (coded as −1) and fathers (coded as 1). The one significant gender difference revealed that assumed similarity was stronger for mothers ($B = .60$, $t = 6.09$, $p < .001$) compared with fathers ($B = .28$, $t = 4.82$, $p < .001$). These effects in the primary analyses also emerged in the supplement analyses (mothers: $B = .78$, $t = 8.58$, $p < .001$; fathers: $B = .38$, $t = 6.70$, $p < .001$). Effect sizes (r) were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + \text{degrees of freedom } [df])}$. In these multilevel models, the Satterthwaite approximation was applied to provide specific degrees of freedom for each effect, which were used to calculate the effect sizes.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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ners' reports with observers' ratings of partners' responsiveness revealed that perceivers' level of agreement with partners ($r = .38$) was no greater than agreement with strangers ($r = .40$). The overall pattern of results indicates that perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness do capture some shared reality, as seen by both partners and outside observers, but are equally shaped by perceivers' own parental responsiveness (assumed similarity) and relationship problems (relationship bias).

Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness and Family Functioning

We applied the same dyadic, multilevel approach to examine the associations between perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness on family functioning (a) immediately within the family interaction and (b) in the home across time. First, we regressed feelings of connectedness as a family during the family interaction on perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness, along with partners' reported responsiveness (agreement), perceivers' reports of their own parental responsiveness (assumed similarity), and relationship problems (relationship bias; see the online supplemental materials for annotated syntax). This analytic strategy tested the flow-on effects of perceived partners' parental responsiveness arising from agreement, assumed similarity, and relationship problems (see Figure 1) and tested our proposition that perceptions of partners' parenting toward children uniquely affect the family system beyond both perceivers' and partners' actual parenting (or shared view of parenting). As shown in Table 3, parents who perceived their partners as less versus more responsive toward their child during the family interaction reported feeling less versus more positive and connected as a family.

We conducted the same analyses to test whether perceptions of partners' parenting predicted family chaos 1 year later (controlling for family chaos assessed at Time 1). These analyses included all 131 parents who completed the assessments 1 year later to maximize statistical power (see the online supplemental materials for annotated syntax). As shown in Table 3, perceiving partners to be less versus more responsive parents predicted greater versus lower family chaos 1 year later. Finally, asymmetric confidence intervals for the indirect effects (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011) linking relationship problems, perceived partner parental responsiveness, and (a) lower family connection during the family task and (b) residual changes in family chaos 1 year later provided support for the process shown in Figure 1 (–.135, 95% confidence interval [CI: –.211, −.069] and .076, 95% CI [.018, .149] for family connection and family chaos, respectively).

Additional Analyses Testing Alternative Explanations

Examining alternative explanations involved running the models presented in Tables 2 and 3 while including alternative variables for relationship problems or perceptions of partners' responsiveness as simultaneous predictors. First, demonstrating that we isolated spillover across family subsystems, although perceived (not observed) responsiveness toward the self during couples' conflict interactions and family interactions was associated with perceiving partners to be less responsive as a parent and lower family connectedness, controlling for these couple-level dynamics

Table 3
Effects of Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness on Family Functioning During Laboratory-Based Family Interactions and in the Home 1 Year Later

Predictors of family functioning	*b*	*SE*	95% CI Low	95% CI High	*t*	*p*	*r*	Gender difference *t*	Gender difference *p*	Gender difference *r*
Predicting family connection during family interaction										
Relationship problems	−.04	.07	−.17	.10	−0.53	.60	.04	0.25	.80	.04
Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness	.44	.06	.31	.56	7.05***	.00	.50	0.11	.91	.01
Partners' self-reported parental responsiveness	.01	.05	−.08	.11	0.31	.75	.03	0.92	.36	.07
Individuals' self-reported parental responsiveness	.30	.06	.18	.42	4.98***	.00	.40	−1.17	.24	.10
Predicting family chaos (Time 2)										
Relationship problems	−.19	.09	−.37	.00	−1.98†	.05	.19	0.70	.49	.07
Chaotic home environment (Time 1)	.81	.08	.65	.97	10.23***	.00	.72	−0.33	.75	.03
Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness	−.25	.09	−.43	−.06	−2.70**	.01	.27	−0.76	.45	.07
Partners' self-reported parental responsiveness	.03	.06	−.10	.15	0.45	.65	.04	0.55	.58	.06
Individuals' self-reported parental responsiveness	.05	.07	−.10	.19	0.67	.50	.06	−0.64	.52	.06

Note. *SE* = standard error. All measures were assessed on a scale from 1 to 7. Gender difference coefficients tested whether the effects significantly differed across mothers (coded as −1) and fathers (coded as 1). No gender differences emerged. Models predicting family connection during the family interaction involved data from 191 parents (96 heterosexual couples). Models predicting family chaos (Time 2) included data from 131 parents who provided longitudinal data (71 mothers, 60 fathers). Effect sizes (*r*) were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + \text{degrees of freedom } [df])}$. In these multilevel models, the Satterthwaite approximation was applied to provide specific degrees of freedom for each effect, which were used to calculate the effect sizes.
† $p = .051$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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did not alter the links between relationship problems, perceived partners' parental responsiveness, and family functioning (see Tables 4 and 5). Second, showing that the effects were independent of responsiveness during couples' conflict interactions also curtails any concerns that the effects were because couples' problems were made salient before the family interactions.[1] Third, perceivers' authoritative parenting attitudes were associated with more positive perceptions of partners' parenting and greater family connectedness, but controlling for parenting attitudes did not change the links between relationship problems, perceived partners' parental responsiveness, and family functioning (see Tables 4 and 5). Fourth, child temperament revealed no significant associations (see Tables 4 and 5) and thus did not contribute to the processes shown in Figure 1. We also ruled out the influence of couple's relationship satisfaction and parental attachment insecurities (see the online supplemental materials).

Finally, we considered reverse pathways to that depicted in Figure 1. As shown in Table 4, the links between relationship problems occurred while controlling for family functioning. Moreover, the indirect effect linking perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness → relationship problems → family connectedness during family interactions did not support this reverse path (–.008, 95% CI [–.035, .055]). There was more (albeit weak) evidence for the reverse path, perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness → relationship problems → family chaos 1 year later (.042, 95% CI [.000, .097]; see also Table 3). However, additional longitudinal analyses revealed that perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness did not predict residual changes in relationship problems assessed 1 year later ($B = -.10$, $t = -1.15$, $p = .254$) as they did with family chaos (see Table 3). In sum, the additional analyses provided robust support that the predicted associations in Figure 1 involving couples' problems biasing perceptions of partners' responsiveness to children (not the self) were independent of other parent and child factors, and were stronger and more robust than potential reverse pathways.

Discussion

The quality of couples' relationships ripples through the family system, including affecting parent–child relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997). The current research examined the role of perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness in these ripple effects by testing whether greater problems in couples' relationships predicted more negative perceptions of partners' parenting during family interactions and whether more negative perceptions of partners' parenting were associated with less connected family interactions and less coordinated family environments in the home. The results indicated that (a) couples only moderately agreed about each other's responsiveness to their child (agreement); (b) perceptions of partners' parenting were equally influenced by perceivers' own responsiveness to their child (assumed similarity) and the relationship problems they experienced with their partner (relationship bias); and (c) the resulting perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness influenced how connected, coordinated, and stable families were during family interactions and across time. In the next section, we discuss the importance of each of these novel findings, including theoretical, empirical, and applied implications.

Agreement and Bias in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness

Examining the relative importance of couples' problems in shaping perceptions of partners' parenting required first addressing foundational (as-yet-unexamined) questions about whether couples agreed about each other's parental responsiveness. Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were significantly associated with how responsive partners reported being toward their child, but this level of agreement was relatively modest, as is typical in judgments of partners' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (meta-analytic $r = .40$; see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). Moreover, examining agreement between perceivers' and outside observers' ratings revealed that perceivers had similar levels of agreement with partners ($r = .38$) as they did with strangers ($r = .40$). Although these associations across perspectives inside and outside the relationship indicate that perceptions of partners' responsiveness do capture some "shared reality," the modest levels of agreement highlight that perceptions of partners' parenting are also determined by other factors that influence or bias the degree to which partners are seen to be responsive to their children.

The current study documented two important sources of bias. One important bias that is prominent in prior theory and research involves perceiving partners to behave similarly to the self (Lemay et al., 2007; West & Kenny, 2011). Accordingly, perceivers who felt they were more versus less responsive toward their child also perceived their partners to be more versus less responsive as a parent. Moreover, this assumed similarity bias was stronger than relative agreement. Thus, perceptions of partners' parenting are more of a function of individuals' own parenting (similarity) than partners' reports of their parenting or observers' view of partners' parenting (agreement).

The second novel perceptual process involves couples' relationship problems spilling over to affect how partners are perceived to behave toward their children. Accounting for agreement and assumed similarity, greater relationship problems predicted more negative perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness. Prior research has shown that relationship problems bias perceptions of partners' behavior toward the self, but this study is the first to show that couples' relationship problems spilled over to perceived parenting. Demonstrating that this spillover was unique to perceptions of parenting, this relationship bias emerged while controlling for perceivers' and observers' ratings of partners' responsiveness to the self. Although spillover from couples' problems to parenting is well established (Cox et al., 2001; Erel & Burman, 1995), these results advance both prior theory and research by showing that perceptions of different family relationships play an important role in family system processes: Problems experienced in one relationship (problems within the couple) influenced perceptions of other family dynamics (partners' responses to child) in ways that, as we discuss next, had repercussions for family functioning.

[1] Parents also rated how typical the family interaction was ("Reflected how my partner would normally interact with my child": 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*; $M = 6.05$, $SD = 1.10$; "Reflected how I would normally interact with my child": $M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.12$). The average scores indicate that the interaction typically reflected normal family dynamics, and controlling for these ratings did not alter any of the effects.

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Table 4
Assessing and Controlling for Alternative Explanations for the Links Between Relationship Problems and Biased Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness

	Effect of alternative variable					Effect of relationship problems				
		95% CI					95% CI			
Alternative variables	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*t*	*p*	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*t*	*p*
Spillover from couples' conflict interaction										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	.03	−.05	.11	0.68	.50	−.32	−.46	−.17	−4.38***	.00
Felt responsiveness from partner	.12	.03	.21	2.59*	.01	−.21	−.36	−.06	−2.79**	.01
Couple experiences during family task										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	.06	−.02	.13	1.48	.14	−.30	−.44	−.15	−4.12***	.00
Felt responsiveness from partner	.25	.17	.33	5.98***	.00	−.21	−.34	−.08	−3.26***	.00
Parenting attitudes										
Authoritarian parenting attitudes	−.04	−.22	.13	−0.48	.63	−.30	−.44	−.16	−4.21***	.00
Authoritative parenting attitudes	.26	.05	.47	2.45*	.02	−.28	−.41	−.14	−4.00***	.00
Child temperament										
Extraversion/surgency	.01	−.11	.14	0.19	.85	−.31	−.45	−.17	−4.32***	.00
Negative affect	.04	−.08	.15	0.65	.52	−.32	−.46	−.18	−4.50***	.00
Effortful control	.02	−.11	.15	0.27	.79	−.30	−.44	−.16	−4.31***	.00
Family functioning										
Family connection during family task	.46	.33	.59	6.89***	.00	−.22	−.35	−.10	−3.45**	.00
Family chaos (Time 1)	.06	−.07	.18	0.91	.36	−.33	−.48	−.18	−4.43***	.00

Note. *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit. These analyses relate to the relationship bias pathway presented in Figure 1. Models are equivalent to those reported in Table 2 but tested the effect of each alternative explanation and relationship problems (along with relative agreement and assumed similarity; see Figure 1) as simultaneous predictors of perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Implications of Biases in Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness

Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness, and the factors that bias these perceptions, are important because they should alter the way people can connect with a partner to generate a secure family environment. The results provided strong evidence of the important role these perceptions have in affecting family systems. Perceiving partners to be a less (vs. more) responsive parent was associated with feeling less connected during family interactions and reporting greater family chaos 1 year later. Indeed, perceptions of partners' responsiveness was a stronger predictor than individuals' own or their partners' reported parenting in determining important family outcomes, and was a stronger and more robust predictor than a host of other alternative explanations, including perceiving the partner as responsive to the self. This shows that perceiving partners to be a good parent is needed to experience a positive, connected, and stable family environment even more than individuals' own feelings of being a good parent or perceiving partners to be a good relationship partner.

These results have important theoretical and practical implications that should drive future research. First, the results are consistent with theoretical perspectives that recognize the interdependence across family subsystems, but they reveal how perceptual processes underpinning family dynamics have been overlooked. The interdependent nature of relationships across family members means that problems within couples' relationships spill over to undermine wider family connections, and perceptions of partners' parenting play an important role in these spillover processes. Moreover, because parents are dependent on one another to build connected, coordinated, and secure family environments, perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness appear to be more essential than one's own parental responsiveness to feeling positive and connected as a family and feeling as though the family is functioning in an organized, cohesive fashion in the home.

Second, interdependence across family subsystems should mean that perceptions of partners' parenting, and the biasing influence of assumed similarity and relationship problems, will have myriad effects across family members, including perceivers, their partners, couples' relationships, and their children. Prior research has demonstrated that biased perceptions can create self-fulfilling dynamics. For example, assuming partners are unresponsive or expecting partner rejection can lead to more destructive interpersonal behavior that produces poorer responsiveness and rejection by partners (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Lemay et al., 2007). Similarly, perceiving partners to be less responsive to children may produce a variety of unhelpful behavioral dynamics, such as interfering with partners' parent–child interactions and rejecting a partner's efforts to help, which is likley to undermine partners' parenting efficacy and satisfaction and create a family environment where it is difficult for either parent to be responsive to their children. The negative effects of poorer parent–child relationships and family chaos on children are well established (see Dumas et al., 2005; van Eldik et al., 2020), but problematic family dynamics, such as greater chaos, also undermine parents' health and well-being (Chang et al., 2019). Thus, the family dynamics and potential self-fulfilling dynamics that more negative perceptions of partners' parenting likely create will shape important outcomes across all family members.

Third, isolating this perceptual pattern has important practical implications. There is evidence that improving couples' romantic relationships, rather than parenting dynamics, more effectively improves family functioning (Adler-Baeder et al., 2013; Cowan, Cowan, & Barry, 2011; Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Cummings,

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Table 5
Assessing and Controlling for Alternative Explanations for the Links Between Lower Perceptions of Partners' Parental Responsiveness and Family Connection During the Family Interaction and Family Chaos Across Time (1 Year Later)

	Alternative variable					Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness				
		95% CI					95% CI			
Alternative explanations	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*t*	*p*	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*t*	*p*
Predicting family connection during the family interaction										
Spillover from couples' conflict interaction										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	−.01	−.09	.07	−0.28	.78	.45	.32	.57	6.85***	.00
Felt responsiveness from partner	.06	−.03	.16	1.35	.18	.41	.28	.54	6.28***	.00
Couple experiences during family task										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	−.04	−.12	.03	−1.12	.26	.47	.33	.60	6.89***	.00
Felt responsiveness from partner	.16	.07	.25	3.38**	.00	.35	.22	.48	5.16***	.00
Parenting attitudes and child temperament										
Authoritarian parenting attitudes	−.06	−.22	.11	−0.65	.52	.44	.32	.57	6.98***	.00
Authoritative parenting attitudes	.09	−.12	.30	0.82	.42	.43	.30	.55	6.63***	.00
Child temperament: Extraversion/surgency	−.06	−.18	.07	−0.91	.37	.45	.32	.57	7.16***	.00
Child temperament: Negative affect	−.01	−.12	.09	−0.27	.79	.44	.31	.56	6.97***	.00
Child temperament: Effortful control	−.03	−.16	.10	−0.44	.66	.44	.32	.56	7.01***	.00
Predicting family chaos across time (1 year after lab visit)										
Spillover from couples' conflict interaction										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	−.03	−.14	.07	−0.58	.56	−.27	−.45	−.08	−2.89**	.01
Felt responsiveness from partner	.04	−.08	.16	0.69	.49	−.28	−.49	−.08	−2.79**	.01
Couple experiences during family task										
Observed partner responsiveness to self	−.07	−.16	.03	−1.43	.16	−.19	−.38	−.00	−1.99*	.05
Felt responsiveness from partner	−.02	−.15	.11	−0.29	.78	−.24	−.44	−.05	−2.47*	.02
Parenting attitudes and child temperament										
Authoritarian parenting attitudes	−.10	−.32	.12	−0.94	.35	−.27	−.45	−.08	−2.84**	.01
Authoritative parenting attitudes	.14	−.13	.42	1.05	.30	−.29	−.49	−.10	−2.97**	.00
Child temperament: Extraversion/surgency	.15	−.01	.32	1.85	.07	−.26	−.44	−.08	−2.83**	.01
Child temperament: Negative affect	−.05	−.19	.10	−0.63	.53	−.26	−.44	−.07	−2.78**	.01
Child temperament: Effortful control	−.06	−.22	.10	−0.78	.44	−.24	−.42	−.06	−2.70**	.01

Note. *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit. These analyses relate to the second pathway presented in Figure 1. Models are equivalent to those reported in Table 3 but tested the effect of each alternative explanation and perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness (along with relative agreement, assumed similarity, and relationship problems) as simultaneous predictors of family connection (top section) and family chaos across time (bottom section).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008; Doss, Roddy, Llabre, Georgia Salivar, & Jensen-Doss, 2020). Our findings illustrate one important reason why this might be the case. Regardless of parenting ability, relationship problems can affect perceptions of parenting and reduce how well couples parent together. Thus, helping couples to resolve their relationship problems is likely to improve family security and stability, not only by facilitating more responsive behavior within the family but also by promoting more positive perceptions of each other's parenting. Moreover, our results indicate that interventions should specifically target couples' potentially biased perceptions of each other's parenting by encouraging couples to reflect on whether their views of their partners' parenting are being unfairly biased by judgments of their own parenting (assumed similarity) or the problems they are facing with their partner (relationship bias).

Caveats and Future Research Directions

Examining perceptions of parenting during a triadic family interaction and assessing family outcomes across time allowed us to examine agreement and bias in perceptions of parenting and associated family functioning as they naturally emerged. Yet, such methods are inevitably correlational, which limits causal conclusions. Additional analyses supported that the effects were not the result of within-couple processes or broader parenting attitudes and child temperament. Showing that the results occurred while controlling for responsiveness during couples' interactions also supported that the order of our measures was unlikely the cause of the results. Nonetheless, our results showing that problems in couples' relationship can spill over to create problematic perceptions and family dynamics highlight that negative perceptions of partners' parenting and poorer family functioning may also spill back to reinforce problems in couples' relationships (see also Cox & Paley, 1997; Gallegos et al., 2020). Although tests of reverse pathways indicated that the pathway from couples' problems to perceived parenting to family functioning was most robust, it is likely that perceptions and evaluations of different family subsystems reciprocally influence one another across time. One valuable research direction is to supplement the strengths of examining

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naturally occurring family dynamics with greater experimental control by testing whether interventions that improve relationship problems improve perceptions of partners' parenting and whether challenging biases in perceptions of partners' parenting improves perceptions of partners' parenting and, in turn, family dynamics and/or relationship problems across time.

Several important processes likely contribute to why more negative perceptions of partners' parenting shape poorer family outcomes, such as reduced trust and confidence in the partner as a coparent and, in turn, less reliance on and cooperation with the partner, perhaps producing greater parental burden and lower parenting efficacy. These potential mechanisms may also shed light on the contexts in which the spillover of couples' problems to perceived parenting may be more harmful, such as when perceivers or partners already have low parenting efficacy or additional stressors are already challenging family functioning. In the current study, self-reports and perceptions of parental responsiveness were high, and couples' problems and family chaos were relatively low. Thus, even when families perceive they are doing well, lower levels of perceived partners' parental responsiveness predict lower family positivity, enjoyment, and connection and greater family chaos. These detrimental effects may be further magnified in contexts in which parents are having greater difficulties being responsive or working together as a family. Identifying key mechanisms and moderators of these important links is a valuable direction for future research.

Finally, the biasing effects of relationship problems, and the resulting effects of more negative perceptions of partners' parenting, were evident for both mothers and fathers. Only one gender difference emerged: Assumed similarity was stronger for mothers compared with fathers. Traditional norms and/or family structures that place greater responsibility on mothers (relative to fathers; see Cancian & Oliker, 2000) may result in mothers' own parental responsiveness more heavily influencing perceptions of the wider family environment. Yet, the degree to which perceptions of partners' responsiveness influenced family functioning did not differ across men and women, revealing that both mothers and fathers need to see their partner as a responsive parent in order to experience a connected and stable family life.

Conclusion

The current research illustrates that problems experienced in couples' relationships influence perceptions of partners' responsiveness to their children in ways that have repercussions for the functioning of the wider family system. Couples only showed modest levels of agreement regarding each other's parental responsiveness toward their children when both parents and their children completed a fun, lab-based family activity. Perceptions of partners' parental responsiveness were equally influenced by perceivers' own parental responsiveness and couples' relationship problems: People who felt they were being less versus more responsive to their child (assumed similarity) and who were experiencing greater versus fewer relationship problems with their partner (relationship bias) perceived their partners to be less responsive parents. Moreover, illustrating the important role that perceptions of partners' parenting have for creating a connected, stable, and secure family environment, perceiving partners to be less responsive parents, in turn, predicted lower feelings of family connectedness during the family interaction and greater family chaos 1 year later. These results Illustrate the important role that perceptions of partners' parenting has for creating a connected, stable, and secure family environment, reveal that perceptual processes are important in understanding and addressing how couples' problems spill over across family subsystems in ways that undermine parent and child adjustment.

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Received January 21, 2020
Revision received August 24, 2020
Accepted August 31, 2020 ■

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