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I say a little prayer for you: Praying for partner increases commitment in romantic relationships

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### Abstract

Partner-focused petitionary prayer (PFPP) has received little attention in the prayer literature. In two studies we examine PFPP to see if it is uniquely important in conveying relationship benefits, whether its benefits are transmitted through an effect on relationship satisfaction, and whether one's own or the partner's PFPP is central to beneficial effects. In study one, we examined PFPP in a sample of 316 undergraduate students who were in an "exclusive" romantic relationship, finding that PFPP was related to later level of commitment and that this relationship was partially mediated through enhanced relationship satisfaction. Study two examined PFPP in a sample of 205, married African American couples, finding that both partners' PFPP was consequential for commitment, with actor effects partially mediated through relationship quality, and partner effects fully mediated. Together the studies suggest the value of continued investigation of PFPP as a potentially important vehicle for enhancing relationship outcomes.

I say a little prayer for you: Prayer increases commitment in romantic relationships

Although the vast majority of Americans pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999), prayer “has been largely marginalized by social scientists who study religion” (Dein & Littlewood, 2008, p.39). This is problematic not only because it restricts attention to an activity that is important for a majority of people, but also because it results in lower precision in discussions of prayer and religious/spiritual behavior. Many different types of prayer have been identified (e.g., see Paloma & Pendleton, 1991) but it suffices to simply note that our focus is on colloquial, petitionary prayer, a form of prayer that invokes the deity’s help in response to specific needs, using the individuals own language rather than a set or “memorized” prayer. In this article, the petitionary prayer of interest is other directed and focuses on the partner’s well-being, namely, partner-focused petitionary prayer (PFPP), a form of prayer that has received little attention in the prayer literature (see Spilka & Ladd, 2013).

Two studies are presented that examine the effect of prayer for a romantic partner on level of commitment to the relationship with that partner. We focus on commitment because it is fundamental to relationship health and is notably absent from extant research on PFPP; commitment has been described as the intentional choice to persist in the relationship and be emotionally attached (Rusbult, 1980), leading partners to become increasingly constrained and dedicated (Stanley, 2005). Study 1 examines this issue in romantic relationships. To determine whether the findings of Study 1 replicate in a marital context and when controls for the dyadic nature of the data are introduced, Study 2 utilizes a sample of married couples.

### *Theoretical framework*

Extant research on prayer has typically examined the impact of distant intercessory prayer on physical health and has been criticized for having “no explicit theories” and

inconsistent findings (e.g., Masters, 2005, p. 271; Sloan, 2008). Mahoney (2010) has developed a relational spirituality framework that addresses this concern in which she argues that a family member may draw on his or her felt connection to the divine to determine goals for family relationships and how to deal with obstacles that thwart such goals. Consistent with this view, we argue that prayer could have an impact on choice of goals and thereby the intentions and willingness to engage in particular behaviors that can either support or undermine relationship functioning, leading to increased relationship satisfaction. For example, Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have suggested that spiritual activities may often help couples to more often “think of the needs of others, be more loving and forgiving, treat each other with respect, and resolve conflict” (p. 82). This proposal seems particularly relevant to PFPP in which there is an explicit focus on the needs of the partner. In addition, investment theory is available to guide the study of factors contributing to commitment, suggesting that stronger commitment should be the result of higher satisfaction with the relationship as well as greater investment size (Rusbult, 1980). Because PFPP can be seen as an investment in the relationship, this suggests both direct and indirect effects of PFPP on commitment.

Likewise, as highlighted in the prototype-willingness model (Gibbons, Gerrard, et al., 2003), intentions, representing conscious goal states, directly influence behavioral choices, and are themselves influenced by beliefs about what significant others would think of one’s behavior. Because prayer highlights the view of a particularly important significant other, God, it has the potential to influence behavioral intentions, specifically PFPP should create pressure to act in manner that is consistent with the belief that God loves one’s partner and would want the pray-er to act in a caring manner. If so, there could be effects on partner’s satisfaction as well as own satisfaction. Similarly, if PFPP helps to prime “implemental intentions” (i.e., plans or means of

achieving a desired goal) these may also affect future behavior (Golwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Bargh, Gollwitzer, et al., 2001), resulting in an impact on partner satisfaction. As a result, there is considerable potential for prayer to influence motivation, intentions, and implemental intentions, enhancing relationship promoting intentions as well as the probability of following through on those intentions. It is hypothesized that the net result will be increased commitment to the relationship through several potential mechanisms.

#### *Prayer for partner and relationship outcomes*

Several recent studies document the impact of prayer on both protective and risk factors for relationships. In regard to protective factors, an experimental study showed that PFPP led to higher levels of agape or selfless love and that this love led to greater willingness to forgive (Lambert, Fincham et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, there is correlational evidence of a robust association between PFPP and relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Beach et al., 2008). Turning to risk factors, two experimental studies showed that PFPP dramatically decreased alcohol use (Lambert, Fincham et al., 2010) which has been shown to be associated with extradyadic sexual behavior in normal (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011) and alcohol dependent samples (Hall et al., 2008). Looking directly at extradyadic sexual behavior, which is strongly related to relationship termination, Fincham, Lambert and Beach (2010) showed experimentally that daily PFPP decreased the likelihood of such behavior. Finally, the inclusion of prayer in a preventive intervention resulted in more positive marital functioning for wives from post intervention to 12 month follow up relative to the intervention without prayer (Beach, Hurt, et al., 2011).

Notwithstanding their strengths, the above studies are subject to important limitations. First, even though experimental evidence demonstrates that relationship outcomes are specific to PFPP rather than prayer more generally (Fincham et al., 2010; Lambert, Fincham et al., 2010), it

has not been shown that the effects are specific to PFPP rather than to *petitionary* prayer in general. Study 1 therefore examines two different types of petitionary prayer: petitionary prayer that is focused on the partner and prayer focused on the self, namely, prayer to cope with one's own life challenges and negative emotions. Second, despite experimental evidence that prayer increases commitment (Fincham et al., 2010), the lack of direct attention to commitment is notable and the present studies therefore investigate the association between petitionary prayer and commitment. Third, all but one prior study has examined PFPP in college students and have focused on European American samples. Because it is important to determine whether phenomena in romantic relationships among students apply to other types of relationships, life stages and ethnic groups, Study 2 examined whether the findings of Study 1 were found in a married, African-American sample. Fourth, no prior study investigates PFPP at a dyadic level. Finally, there is no data on mechanisms relating PFPP to commitment; Study 2 therefore extends prior research by examining a potential mechanism relating PFPP to commitment.

### **Study 1**

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, it examines whether there is a relationship between PFPP and later relationship commitment. Second, it investigates whether any such relationship is unique to PFPP or is also found for another common form of petitionary prayer, namely, petitioning the Deity for help in meeting one's own life challenges and help in coping with negative emotions. Third, because relationship satisfaction is viewed as the "final common pathway" (Jacobson, 1985) by which behavior influences relationship processes such as commitment, we examine whether PFPP accounts for unique variance in later commitment and whether relationship satisfaction mediates the association found between PFPP and commitment.

### **Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 316 undergraduate students from an introductory family and child science course at a large southern U.S. university who were in the same “exclusive” romantic relationship over the course of the study and provided complete data. This class meets university liberal studies requirements in social sciences, so students potentially represent all colleges and majors on campus. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and students received points towards course credit for their participation. The points could also be obtained by completion of an exercise that did not involve study participation. Participants (286 female) averaged 19.05 years of age ( $SD=1.66$ ) and had been in their relationship an average of 13.7 months ( $SD=12.44$ ).

**Procedure and measures.** As a part of a larger study, those students who chose to participate were sent an e-mail link to an online survey during the first week of the semester where they completed two prayer measures, answered a question about attending religious services and completed an assessment of relationship satisfaction. Seven weeks later they again completed an online assessment that included a measure of dedication commitment.

**Relationship satisfaction.** Funk and Rogge (2007) developed the Couple Satisfaction Inventory using item response theory to derive a 4-item measure with optimized psychometric properties. Sample items are “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” (answered on a 6 point scale ranging from not at all to extremely ) and “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner” (answered on a 6 point scale ranging from “not at all true” to “very true”). Their measure correlates .87 with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and .79 with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory. In the current sample, coefficient alpha was .92.

**Partner focused petitionary prayer (PFPP).** To measure PFPP we used the same measure as Fincham et al. (2010) that comprised 4-items (“I pray for the well being of my

romantic partner,” “I pray that good things will happen for my partner,” “I ask God to watch over my partner” and “I pray for my partner to reach his/her goals”). Participants indicated the frequency with which they engaged in the behavior described by each item on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“very frequently”). Scores were summed such that larger scores indicated greater frequency of prayer for the partner. Coefficient alpha was .72.

**Self-focused prayer (SFP).** Three items were used that focused on the self (e.g., “I pray to cope with life's challenges,” “I pray when I am angry” and “I pray when I am feeling down or sad.”). Higher scores indicated greater engagement in such prayer. Coefficient alpha was .83.

**Religious participation.** A single item asked, “How often do you attend religious services?” Responses were given on a four point scale ranging from “Never, or almost never” to “One or more times per week.” Higher scores indicated more frequent attendance.

**Commitment.** Four items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) measured dedication to the relationship (e.g., “My relationship with my spouse/partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life”, “I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now,” “I like to think of my mate and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her," “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter”). Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements reflecting their dedication to the relationship on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Higher scores indicated greater dedication ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

## Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables studied are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that PFPP assessed at the beginning of the semester correlated positively with commitment measured seven weeks later. However, religious participation and



SFP also correlated with commitment raising the question of whether PFPP accounted for variance in dedication commitment over and above these variables. Finally, the high positive correlation between relationship satisfaction and commitment underlines the importance of examining the PFPP-commitment association in a multivariate context to see if satisfaction may account for the PFPP - commitment relationship.

A regression analysis was therefore conducted in which dedication commitment served as the dependent variable and relationship satisfaction, religiosity, SFP and PFPP served as independent variables. Only relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .47, t = 9.59, p < .001$ ) and PFPP ( $\beta = .21, t = 2.8, p < .01$ ) emerged as significant predictor variables in this equation,  $R^2 = .54, F(4,311) = 31.98, p < .001$ .

To address the final aim, to determine whether relationship satisfaction mediated the association between PFPP and dedication commitment, a bootstrap analysis ( $n=5,000$ ) was performed to calculate the indirect effect between PFPP and dedication (Preacher & Hays, 2008). The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect, .044 to .136, did not include zero indicating statistically significant mediation. However, the mediation was only partial as the direct relation between PFPP and commitment remained significant,  $c' = .17, t = 4.68, p < .001$ .

## **Discussion**

This study is among the first to examine different foci for petitionary prayer. It found that petitionary prayer focused on the partner accounted for variance in later dedication commitment independently of petitionary prayer for help in meeting one's life challenges and coping with negative emotions. Moreover, this finding did not simply reflect overall religious participation. Finally, PFPP was not simply a proxy index of relationship satisfaction as the association with commitment remained significant with satisfaction statistically controlled. In fact, the

statistically indirect effect between PFPP and dedication commitment is consistent with the view that relationship satisfaction mediates this relationship. Likewise, the continuing predictive effect of PFPP on commitment is consistent with it exerting additional influence on commitment due to its role as an investment in the relationship.

Although promising, these findings are limited by the possibility of a positive bias in reporting prayer for partner relative to self-focused prayer, the nature of the sample studied, emerging adults, and the availability of data from only one partner in the relationship. This raises the question of whether PFPP plays a similar role in more established relationships and when data are examined in a dyadic context. In addition, one may wonder if the associations will be observed across ethnic groups. Study 2 addresses these limitations.

## Study 2

To address the concerns mentioned, data were collected from both members of the couple which allowed examination not only of intra-partner effects (actor effects) but also inter-partner effects (partner effects) using the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Our attempt to test again the mediating role of relationship satisfaction, makes this study one of only a few to extend the use of APIM to examine mediation. Ledermann, Macho and Kenny (2011) offer a formal presentation of the Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation Model or APIMeM. This model is shown in Figure 1.

## Method

**Participants.** Participation in the study was open to all married couples in which both partners were over 21, one or both partners were 60 years of age or younger, and in which both partners (91.1%) or one of the partners (8.9%) self identified as African American. In all cases, the 205 couples were comfortable describing themselves as “African American” couples. The

average length of the relationship was 10.46 years and the average number of children in the home was 1.9. For husbands the modal level of education was “some college/technical school” (35.4%), with a substantial minority reporting bachelor level (25%) or graduate level (14.6%) degrees. Couples were recruited through direct advertising, community based recruitment events, local media and local pastors to participate in a study of a marriage enrichment program and had been randomly assigned to a control group that read a secular self-help book (“*12 Hours to a Great Marriage*,” Markman, Stanley et al., 2004) or to receive a two session version of the Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP), a secular program delivered across two Saturday mornings. The groups did not differ on demographics.

**Procedure and measures.** As part of a larger IRB approved study, participants initially completed a measure of PFPP and after the completion of the PREP program they completed measures of relationship dedication. There were no significant differences between the two groups on either of these measures. Finally, to assess for potential mediation of the association between prayer and dedication, a measure of relationship satisfaction was also obtained at T2.

**Partner focused petitionary prayer (PFPP).** To measure PFPP we asked three questions about how often in the last month the participants had engaged in prayer relating to the partner (e.g., “Pray for your mate’s well-being?” “Pray for your mate to reach his/her goals?”). Answers were indicated on a four point scale with labels, “never,” “rarely,” “occasionally” and “frequently” (husband  $\alpha = .78$ ; wife  $\alpha = .80$ ). Higher scores indicated greater PFPP.

**Relationship satisfaction.** The Quality Marriage Index (QMI, Norton, 1983) was used to assess marital satisfaction. This measure was chosen for its conceptual clarity as it includes only subjective evaluation items and thus scores can be easily interpreted. Higher scores indicated greater marital satisfaction (husband  $\alpha = .95$ ; wife  $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Commitment.** The same four items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) used in Study 1 were again used to assess dedication to the relationship (husband  $\alpha = .79$ ; wife  $\alpha = .80$ ).

## Results

The data were analyzed using a version of the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (see Figure 1) that allows for the assessment of mediation (APIMeM, Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). In this model there are four effects that can be mediated: the husband actor effect, the wife actor effect, the husband partner effect and the wife partner effect. Each of these direct effects has two different indirect effects associated with it resulting in eight indirect effects overall. Before proceeding with the APIMeM it is important to determine whether the dyads are distinguishable or indistinguishable. At the conceptual level, heterosexual dyads are logically distinguishable on the basis of their sex but this does not necessarily mean that they are empirically distinguishable. To test for empirical distinguishability (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), we conducted an omnibus test by imposing constraints on all direct effects (i.e.,  $a_{A1} = a_{A2}$ ,  $b_{A1} = b_{A2}$ ,  $c'_{A1} = c'_{A2}$ ,  $a_{P1} = a_{P2}$ ,  $b_{P1} = b_{P2}$ , and  $c'_{P1} = c'_{P2}$ ). The constrained model provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(6) = 4.19$ ,  $p > .10$ , CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = 0.0, SRMR = .055. Consequently, we used the APIMeM with indistinguishable dyads.

Because indirect effects are not normally distributed (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), bootstrapping ( $n=2,000$ ) was used to estimate them. One actor simple indirect effect (own prayer  $\rightarrow$  own satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  own dedication) accounting for 47.2% of the total effect (i.e., direct effect + indirect effect) was significant, IE = .28, CI = .20 to .38. However, this mediation effect was only partial as the direct effect between prayer and dedication was significant  $c' = .16$ , CI = .00 to .32. Similarly, one of the two partner effects (own prayer  $\rightarrow$  partner satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  partner

dedication) was significant,  $IE = .19$ ,  $CI = .11$  to  $.31$  and accounted for 32.25% of the total effect. In this case, however, the direct effect was nonsignificant suggesting that the mediation was complete. These effects are illustrated in Figure 2.

## **Discussion**

Consistent with the results of Study 1, we found an association between one's own PFPP and own later commitment. In addition, PFPP by the spouse was also associated with own commitment. As in study 1, these associations were mediated by relationship satisfaction, with actor effects partially mediated and partner effects fully mediated. That is, we observed significant self and partner effects on the key mediator, relationship satisfaction. In turn, relationship satisfaction mediated the relationship of PFPP and dedication commitment. Because spouses were empirically indistinguishable, both husband and wife prayer is potentially important in understanding the role of PFPP. It is not the case in the current data set that prayer demonstrates larger effects on self or partner as a function of gender of the person praying. However, for both husbands and wives, the associations for PFPP are greater for one's own satisfaction and commitment than for one's partner's satisfaction and commitment.

## **General Discussion**

This series of studies indicates that prayer for one's partner is related to later increased commitment to that partner. At a practical level this is useful information and perhaps provides some support for widely held beliefs about the power of prayer to help maintain relationships. However, not all petitionary prayer exerted equivalent effects. In Study 1, we found that petitionary prayer focused on the self was not related to increased commitment. Only partner focused petitionary prayer was found to contribute significantly to commitment. Accordingly, the most common type of prayer, SFP, is not likely to contribute to increased commitment to the

relationship. Rather, those who engaged in PFPP showed greater effects. In addition, study one suggested that a primary mechanism by which PFPP might influence commitment is by enhancing relationship satisfaction. Indeed, relationship satisfaction was a significant, albeit partial, mediator of the PFPP-commitment association. At the same time, there was a direct relation between PFPP and commitment that was not mediated by increased satisfaction.

Study two replicated and extended these findings. Using an older, married African American sample, PFPP was found to be related to later, enhanced dedication commitment. However, the design of the study allowed examination of both own and partner effects. There were significant actor and partner effects, suggesting that PFPP influences one's own commitment, in part, by increasing one's own satisfaction with the relationship, but the impact of PFPP on partner commitment is fully mediated by increased partner satisfaction with the relationship. As in study 1, the actor effect suggests that PFPP's association with commitment is not entirely mediated by its relation to satisfaction.

The current pattern of results suggests a need to revise some previous ideas about the direct impact of PFPP on relationships. They strongly suggest a primary pathway from PFPP to increased relationship satisfaction with ripple effects on potentially many other aspects of relationships, including commitment. This leads us to suggest the simplifying hypothesis that researchers focus on better understanding the effect of PFPP on relationship satisfaction and the mechanisms by which this occurs. In practical contexts it suggests that PFPP is useful to relationships by increasing one's own relationship quality and so can provide a helpful adjunct to other relationship enhancement activities. At the same time, the relationship of PFPP with *partner satisfaction* is intriguing and requires additional elaboration as does *the unmediated* portion of PFPP's impact on one's own satisfaction. Lest it appear otherwise, we are not

endorsing wholesale use of prayer with all couples: it would only be appropriate for religious/spiritually oriented couples who already engage in prayer.

A limitation of the current data is that all participants were drawn from the southeastern United States. In the southeast, prayer, and petitionary prayer in particular, may be relatively more common than in other parts of the country. Accordingly, it would be useful to see if the relationships can be replicated in other regions and with groups who may engage in less petitionary prayer. For such groups it may be necessary to consider alternative forms of behavior that could serve a similar purpose and be naturally embedded within varying religious traditions. Study 1 is also limited by the primarily female sample whereas Study 2 assessed individual and not joint prayer which, when appropriately executed, might be expected to produce larger effects.

Future research should also build upon the foundation laid by the present findings to identify circumstances that can amplify the effect of PFPP on relationship satisfaction. One clue that emerges in the current series of studies is that partner PFPP may be consequential. This could be due to direct knowledge of partner PFPP or it could be due to other partner behavior that results from PFPP. Unfortunately, we do not know to what extent partners were fully aware of each other's PFPP activities.

In summary, the current set of results highlights the potential value of a relatively simple activity, PFPP, which has implications for satisfaction and, in turn, dedication commitment. However, PFPP is quite versatile and potentially varied. As has been noted previously (Beach et al., 2008), prayer could include a wide range of potentially valuable components that may lead to increased impact on subsequent marital behavior as well as increased impact on one's own and one's partner's satisfaction.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Inter-correlations Among Variables in Study 1.

|             | 1     | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5      |
|-------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Religsvc |       | .585** | .584** | .103   | .173** |
| 2. PFPP     |       |        | .718** | .203** | .260** |
| 3. SFP      |       |        |        | .084   | .114*  |
| 4. Sat      |       |        |        |        | .509** |
| 5. D(t2)    |       |        |        |        |        |
| Mean        | 2.16  | 10.317 | 10.399 | 20.798 | 15.554 |
| SD          | 1.052 | 3.722  | 4.482  | 3.793  | 3.126  |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

N=316

Religsvc = Attendance at religious services; PFPP = Partner focused petitionary prayer; SFP = Self-focused prayer;

Sat= Couple Satisfaction Inventory; D(t2) = Dedication Commitment at Time 2

Figure 1

The Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation Model Showing the Relations Among Prayer (WP, HP), Marital Satisfaction (WSat, HSat) and Dedication Commitment (WD, HD)

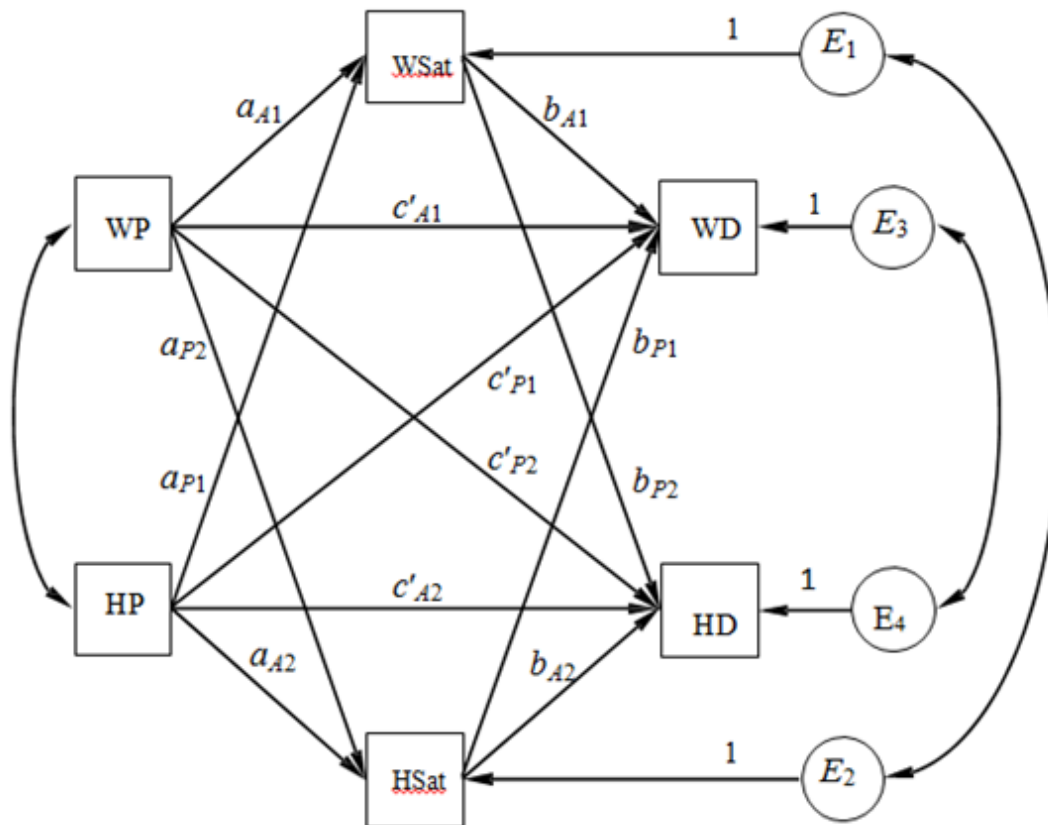
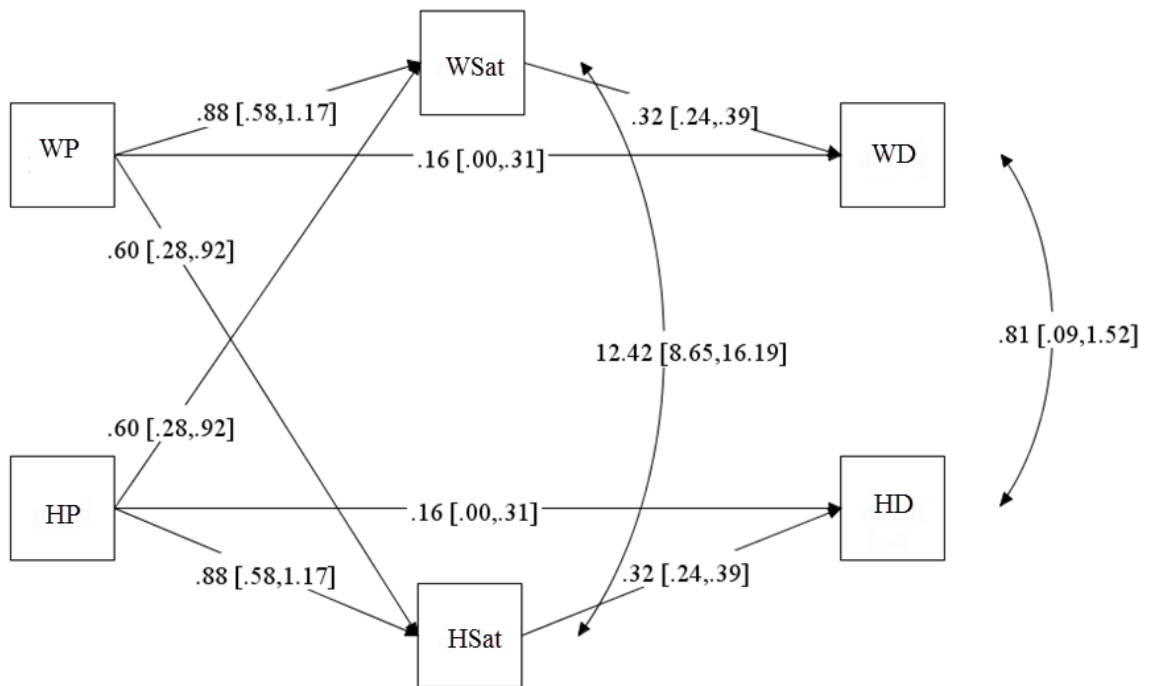


Figure 2

Significant Paths in the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model for Indistinguishable Dyads



H=husband; W=wife; Sat = Quality Marriage Index; D = dedication commitment  
 numbers appearing in [ ] are 95% confidence intervals