Emotion

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Francesca Righetti, Judith Gere, Wilhelm Hofmann, Mariko L. Visserman, and Paul A. M. Van Lange

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The Burden of Empathy: Partners' Responses to Divergence of Interests in Daily Life

Francesca Righetti
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Judith Gere
Kent State University

Wilhelm Hofmann
University of Cologne

Mariko L. Visserman and Paul A. M. Van Lange
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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Empathy has often been discussed as a beneficial process from which favorable individual and interpersonal experiences may be derived. The present work investigates whether empathy may sometimes be a burden rather than a benefit, under certain interpersonal circumstances. Specifically, we hypothesized that encountering situations of divergence of interests with a partner may cause discomfort, and that empathizing with one's partner would exacerbate this discomfort, resulting in higher levels of negative mood and stress that can affect relationship satisfaction. We tested these hypotheses using innovative experience sampling methodology in which both partners reported on their experiences in their natural environments. In support, we found that when people encountered divergence of interests with one's partner, as compared with when they did not, they experienced higher negative mood and stress and, consequently, lower relationship satisfaction. These effects were intensified, rather than reduced, by empathy.

Keywords: divergence of interests, empathy, experience sampling, goal conflict, close relationships

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Contemporary society demands people to pursue and succeed in multiple goals, such as being successful at work, being fit and healthy, having an extensive social network, maintaining positive family relationships, engaging in multiple hobbies, being knowledgeable, and to maintain a committed and satisfying romantic relationship. Because of this abundance of personal goals, people in close relationships increasingly encounter situations of divergence of interests between their own goals and their partner's or their relationship goals. For example, while one partner may wish to spend a Sunday afternoon in the gym, the other might wish to go to the movies together. Or while one partner may wish to move to another country to promote his career, the other may wish to stay in the native country and live close to her family. Divergence of interests represent situations in which the partners' preferences do not align and the most rewarding outcome for each partner is different (e.g., Kelley, 1979; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Shallcross & Simpson, 2012).

Little is known about what types of divergence of interests partners are likely to encounter in their daily life. In the present work, we used an experience sampling methodology to investigate, for the first time in a naturalistic environment, (a) what types of divergences of interests romantic partners encounter in their daily life, (b) how they affect individual and relationship well-being, and (c) the role that empathy plays in these circumstances. While empathy has often been regarded as a beneficial emotion in interpersonal processes (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), one key purpose of this article is to examine whether empathy may have detrimental effects for the individual and the relationship when people encounter divergence of interests with one's partner.

Consequences of Divergence of Interests for Mood and Relationship Satisfaction

When people are in compatible relationships, their preferences are aligned and the relationship goes smoothly and harmoniously (Berscheid, 1985). Consistently, previous research has shown that people are the happiest and experience the highest level of closeness when they engage in activities that fulfill both partners' goals as compared with only one partner's goal (Gere, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2011). However, individuals sometimes encounter situations in which fulfilling both partners' preferences is not possible and individuals need to choose between pursuing their own or their partner's wishes to promote the well-being of the

Francesca Righetti, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Judith Gere, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kent State University; Wilhelm Hofmann, Department of Psychology, University of Cologne; Mariko L. Visserman and Paul A. M. Van Lange, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Francesca Righetti, Department of Social Psychology, Vrije Universiteit, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: f.righetti@vu.nl

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relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Simpson, 2007). This dilemma is not trivial because people often have good reasons for choosing either option. On the one hand, they love their partner, want to commit to their relationship, and promote the partner's well-being. On the other hand, they are committed to other important personal goals or want to stand up for their own preferences. These situations involve uncertainty about the concrete outcomes of each decision, interpersonal risk and concerns about potential losses, rejection, and exploitation.

According to Berscheid (1983), a large portion of an individual's daily activities are organized around actions that serve higher-order plans, or goals. When these activities are interrupted by the partner, or when the partner somehow interferes with these activities, the individual is likely to experience negative emotions and stress. This occurs because expectations about which, and how, activities should be accomplished are violated. Thus, situations of divergence of interests represent situations in which the partner's preferences interfere with the individual's goals and the pursuit of those goals cannot proceed smoothly.

Furthermore, encountering a situation of divergence of interests with a partner represents a situation of goal conflict (e.g., Emmons & King, 1988), in that personal goals or preferences are in conflict with relationship goals or preferences (Gere et al., 2011). Decisions made in circumstances of goal conflict are characterized by psychological tension and discomfort, and by lower psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Blascovich et al., 1993; Emmons & King, 1988; Kleiman & Hassin, 2011). Thus, in our work, we tested whether encountering divergence of interests with one's partner increases levels of negative mood and stress. Furthermore, we also tested whether encountering divergence of interests would lower relationship satisfaction, in that the negative affect experienced in those situations would become associated with the relationship through the experience of goal obstruction (Gere & Schimmack, 2013), or (mis)attribution processes (i.e., when people attribute the source of their affect to the inaccurate cause, e.g., when the experience of goal conflict and the resulting tension is attributed to the partner rather than to the self; Aron & Aron, 1986; Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

The Burden of Empathy

Empathy—the ability to vicariously feel the emotions of others (Bernhardt & Singer, 2012)—has usually been considered an emotion that brings positive outcomes in interpersonal life (e.g., Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). A large literature shows that empathy yields positive interaction outcomes, such as helping behavior, trust, and prosociality (for a review, see Batson, Ahmad, & Lishner, 2009), while inhibiting aggression (Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994). Furthermore, in close relationships, empathic partners are more likely to experience high levels of relationship satisfaction (Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Davis & Oathout, 1987, 1992) because they are likely to enact several positive behaviors (i.e., showing warmth and sensitivity, being good support providers, or validate the partner's feelings) that will stimulate positive interpersonal interactions and enhance their own and their partners' satisfaction (Davis & Oathout, 1987).

However, there may be circumstances in which empathy might be a burden, rather than a benefit, in interpersonal contexts. The observation or imagination of another's affective state induces shared states in the observer (see Bernhardt & Singer, 2012; for a review). For example, research has shown that empathy increases negative affect after observing others in distress (e.g., Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987). Studies have also repeatedly shown that observing affective states in others activates neurological processes similar to those that would be active if the person experienced those affective states firsthand (e.g., Keysers & Gazzola, 2007; Preston & de Waal, 2002), and this phenomenon is even more likely to occur when observing the affective state of close others or romantic partners (Cheng, Chen, Lin, Chou, & Decety, 2010). Specifically, empathy may induce individuals to feel the partner's discomfort because empathy causes individuals to process and incorporate not only their own negative affect, but also that experienced by the partner. Therefore, knowing or imagining the partner's discomfort during a divergence of interests may intensify the negative affect that is experienced by highly empathic individuals.

Thus, we predicted that empathy will induce individuals to be particularly sensitive to divergence of interests with their partner and be more negatively affected by them, experiencing higher levels of negative mood and stress when encountering these situations. Furthermore, we expected that these negative affective reactions to divergence of interests will also impact relationship satisfaction. Specifically, we hypothesized that the positive effects of empathy on relationship satisfaction in daily life will be removed in circumstances in which partners have encountered situations of divergence of interests.

Research Overview

To test how individuals are affected by encountering divergence of interests with one's partner and the moderating role of empathy, we conducted an experience sampling study with romantic couples. Experience sampling is a labor-intensive method, in which information about participants is gathered several times a day for several days. The benefit of this methodology is that events, thoughts, and feelings can be assessed in their natural context and close to their occurrence. As such, compared with diary studies and questionnaires, experience sampling methodology minimizes retrospective biases and allows researchers to gain a more realistic view on everyday processes (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).

Method

Participants

Participants were 130 couples ($N = 260$) who were recruited via advertisements on social media (e.g., Facebook), various Internet forums, and personal approach. The sample size was specified before data collection, based on typical sample sizes in relationship studies. All participants lived in the Netherlands and were required to speak fluent Dutch. Couples could participate in the study if they were together for longer than 4 months, if they had no children, and if they had a smartphone. Partners were paid 80 Euros each for their participation if they responded to at least 80% of the signals in the experience sampling (and diary) procedure. Participants who responded to less than 80% were paid according to the number of signals they had responded to (i.e., 0.50 Euros for

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each signal of the experience sampling part). As additional incentive, participants who responded to more than 80% of the signals were entered into a raffle for a bonus of 200 Euros.

All couples were heterosexual, except for one homosexual (lesbian) couple. Data from the experience sampling procedure were not collected for one couple because they broke up after study intake, data from two couples and one individual were excluded because they did not properly follow the instructions at intake. The analyses were conducted with the remaining 253 participants. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 43 years (M = 23.33, SD = 3.65). Over half of the participants (63.6%) were students, 34% were working full time, and 2.4% were both working and studying. Couples' romantic involvement ranged from 4 months to 17 years (M = 34.13, SD = 29.01 months) and 34.8% of the couples were living together, of which a minority (2.4%) was married.

Procedure

Romantic partners came to the lab together and completed some questionnaires in separate rooms where they could not see or hear each other. After that, the experimenter provided instructions about the experience sampling procedure and explained to participants what a situation of divergence of interests is. Participants also received a booklet containing those instructions. For example, in the booklet participants read:

> A situation of divergence of interests is a situation in which you and your partner had different preferences (e.g., on Saturday you would like to visit your family while he or she prefers to spend time with joint friends; both you and your partner would prefer that the other would wash the dishes and one of you has to do it; you want to watch a science fiction movie, your partner wants to watch a documentary; both of you want to sit on the comfortable chair but only one of you can do it; you would like to meet with a friend while your partner feels uncomfortable if you do so etc.). Even if you and your partner did not communicate about each other's preferences, you might have still encountered this situation (e.g., by knowing—even if not communicated—that your partner's preferences were different than yours). Furthermore, these situations should not only regard very important preferences, they could also be about mundane ones (e.g., who sits in the best chair). What is important is that your first preference should be different than your partner's first preference (so if you are happier if your partner sits in the best chair than if you would sit there, and your partner is also happier to sit in the best chair than if you would do so, this is NOT a situation of divergence of interests because you both prefer that your partner would sit in the best chair).

The experience sampling always started on the Saturday after the intake session. The experience sampling was implemented using the SurveySignal application (Hofmann & Patel, 2015). For 8 days (2 Saturdays, 2 Sundays, 1 Monday, 1 Tuesday, 1 Thursday, and 1 Friday), participants received six signals per day, approximately one signal every 2 hr, as recommended by Hektner, Schmidt, and Csikszentmihalyi (2009). The signals were randomly sent within a time window of 2 hr (with at least 1 hr in between signals). Participants received a text message that contained a link that directed them to a Qualtrics survey that took approximately 2 to 4 min to complete. If participants were not able to click on the link within an hour, the link expired. In the evenings, participants also filled out a longer daily diary questionnaire; however, those data do not address the current research question and, thus, will not be discussed further.

In general, participants had a high response rate and responded to 86.8% of the experience sampling signals. In the survey, participants were first asked to respond to a few questions about how they felt in that current moment (i.e., mood, stress and relationship satisfaction) and, after that, to assess whether their current state was influenced by a previous divergence of interests with their partner, they were asked if they had encountered such a situation in the previous hour. Participants reported a total of 1,072 situations of divergence of interests.[1]

Measures

Intake. During the lab intake of the study, participants completed several questionnaires including the 7-item empathic concern scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983; e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"; α = .78), the emotional stability scale of the Brief HEXACO Inventory (de Vries, 2013; 4 items; "I have to cry during sad or romantic movies"; α = .56), and relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; 4 items; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"; α = .82) on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree).*

Experience sampling. Participants first reported their current mood (2 items; "At the moment, I am in a negative mood," "At the moment, I am in a positive mood," reverse-scored item; α = .84), stress (1 item; "At the moment, I am stressed"), and relationship satisfaction (1 item; "At the moment, I am satisfied with my relationship") on 7-point scales (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *extremely*). After that, participants reported whether they had encountered a situation of divergence of interests with their partner in the previous hour ("In the past hour, have you encountered a situation of divergence of interests?—even if it was not communicated with your partner"). If participants reported that such a situation had occurred, they were asked to describe the most recent situation.

Follow up. One year later, participants were contacted again and asked to fill in a short survey in Qualtrics. Participants reported their relationship satisfaction as at Intake (α = .86).

Results

Analysis Strategy

Because each participant provided responses on multiple occasions and because data provided by two partners in an ongoing relationship are nonindependent, we analyzed our data using multilevel-modeling procedures (Kenny Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In our analyses, measures from each time point of the experience sampling procedure were nested within participants, who were nested within couples, in a three-level hierarchical linear model. Presence of divergence of interests, negative mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction represented Level 1 variables because we assessed them at each time point of

[1] The data analyzed in the current article were part of a large research project that included several measures. Published articles utilizing this dataset at the time of writing are Righetti, Luchies, Van Gils, Slotter, Witcher, and Kumashiro (2015), Righetti, Balliet, Visserman, and Hofmann (2015). None of these articles theoretically or empirically overlap with the idea tested in the present work.

the experience sampling procedure. Empathy represented a Level 2 variable because this is an individual trait assessed at study intake. The presence of divergence of interests was dummy coded (0 = *no divergence*, 1 = *divergence*). Continuous Level 1 predictors were centered within each individual's mean to isolate within-person effects (Enders & Tofighi, 2007).[2]

Consequences of Encountering Divergence of Interests

Figure 1 illustrates the various domains of divergence of interests that couples encounter in their daily life, together with their frequencies and their impact on mood and relationship satisfaction for each domain. A description of each domain can be found in Table 1 in the Supplemental Material). Different situations varied in frequency, $\chi^2(16, N = 1{,}067) = 602.71$, $p < .001$. The most frequent situations of divergence of interests were issues regarding joint recreational activities (16.1%), chores (14.4%), and coordinating time together (11.2%). Divergence of interests were also reported frequently regarding partner behaviors (9.8%), whether to spend time together or not (7.8%), and food and consumption (7.5%).

We assessed the overall effect of encountering a divergence of interests with one's partner on mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction. When encountering a divergence of interests, participants reported greater negative mood ($b = .28$, $SE = .03$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.21, .35], $p < .001$), greater stress ($b = .18$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI = [.10, .26], $p < .001$), and lower relationship satisfaction ($b = -.23$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI = [−.28, −.18], $p < .001$) than when they did not encounter divergence of interests.[3] Next, we assessed whether mood and stress mediated the relationship between encountering divergence of interests and relationship satisfaction. Mood and stress were related to relationship satisfaction when controlling for divergence of interests ($b = -.24$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI = [−.25, −.23], $p < .001$ and $b = -.09$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI = [−.10, −.07], $p < .001$, respectively). Sobel tests revealed a significant indirect effect for mood and for stress separately ($z = -7.91$, $p < .001$, and $z = -4.49$, $p < .001$, respectively), indicating that mood and stress were both partial mediators of the association between divergence of interests and relationship satisfaction (see Figure 2 for mood and see Figure 1 in the Supplemental Material for stress). Finally, we performed lagged analyses to assess whether the amount of divergence of interests that were encountered during the experience sampling predicted change in relationship satisfaction at follow up, when controlling for relationship satisfaction at intake. There was no significant association between the amount of divergence of interests in those 8 days and relationship satisfaction 1 year later, when controlling for relationship satisfaction before the experience sampling procedure ($b = -.10$, $SE = .11$, $p = .368$).

The Role of Empathy

To assess whether individuals high in empathy experience the most severe consequences of divergence of interests, we, separately, regressed mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction onto empathy, divergence of interests, and the interaction term. Results indicated significant two-way interactions of empathy with divergence of interests in predicting mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction ($b = .16$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, $b = .13$, $SE = .04$, $p = .002$, and $b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .013$, respectively; see Figures 3 and 4). Specifically, empathy was not associated with mood and stress in absence of divergence of interests ($b = -.05$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI = [−.13, .03], $p = .185$ and $b = .09$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI = [−.03, .21], $p = .112$, respectively), but empathy was associated with greater negative mood and stress in situations of divergence of interests ($b = .11$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI = [.01, .21], $p = .032$ and $b = .22$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI = [.08, .36], $p = .001$, respectively). Furthermore, empathy was associated with higher relationship satisfaction in absence of divergence of interest ($b = .09$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI = [.01, .17], $p = .016$), but empathy was not associated with relationship satisfaction when divergence of interests were encountered ($b = .02$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI = [−.08, .12], $p = .685$).

To assess whether these effects on relationship satisfaction were mediated by mood and stress, we performed a mediated moderation analysis (Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005). First, we regressed relationship satisfaction onto divergence of interests, empathy, mood, the interaction between divergence of interests and empathy, the interaction between mood and divergence of interests, and the interaction between mood and empathy.[4] These analyses revealed a significant main effect of mood on relationship satisfaction ($b = -.22$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI = [−.24, −.20], $p < .001$), whereas the interaction between empathy and divergence of interests became nonsignificant ($b = -.01$, $SE = .03$, $p = .568$), indicating that the moderator effect of empathy and divergence of interests on relationship satisfaction was fully mediated by mood. We conducted the same analysis with stress as a mediator and results showed a significant main effect of stress on relationship satisfaction ($b = -.08$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI = [−.10, −.06], $p < .001$), whereas the interaction between empathy and divergence of interests became nonsignificant ($b = -.04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .162$), indicating that the moderator effect of empathy and divergence on relationship satisfaction was fully mediated by stress (see Figure 5 for mood and see Figure 2 in the Supplemental Material for stress).

To show that, when encountering divergence of interests, empathy was associated with greater negative mood, stress, and reduced relationships satisfaction above and beyond general emotional stability, we performed all of the above analyses controlling for emotional stability. Results did not change, highlighting that

[2] Results remain statistically significant if we adopt grand mean centering. Findings were not reliably moderated by participant sex; therefore, we treated dyad members as indistinguishable.

[3] One possibility is that divergence of interests are associated with negative mood and stress because in those instances people need to sacrifice. However, previous research has not necessarily linked sacrifice with negative personal outcomes (e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Furthermore, in our study, after people reported a situation of divergence of interests, we asked them who sacrificed (four response options; "Me," "My partner," "We reached a compromise and both sacrificed a little bit," or "None of us [we went separate ways]"). Mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction did not significantly differ across these different outcomes (*p*s ranged from .127 to .511).

[4] In these analyses we did not use the within-person centering approach to be able to compare the total effect with the direct effect because the moderating variable (i.e., empathy) is a Level 2 variable. However, if we use the within-person centering approach, the mediated moderation is also statistically significant.

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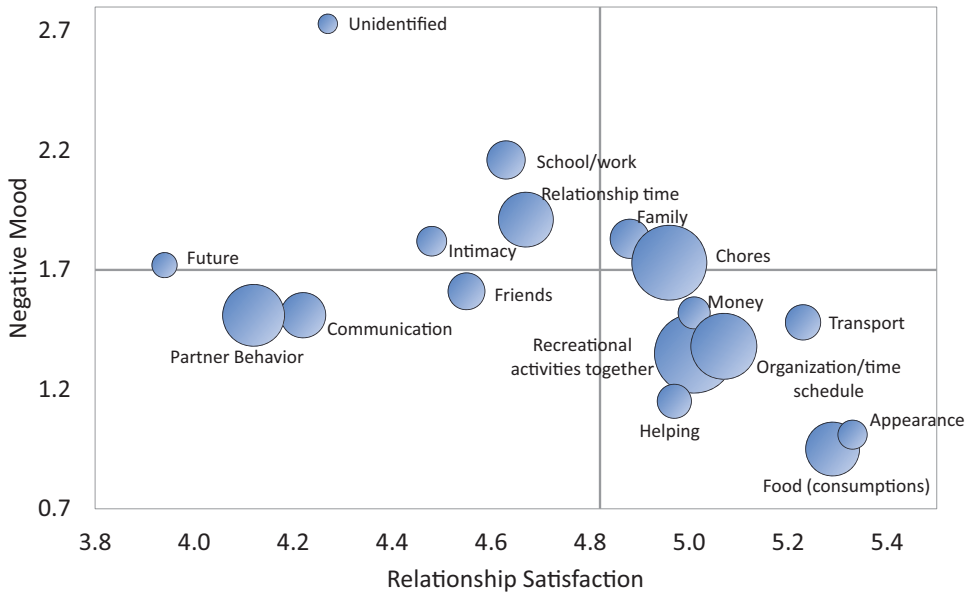

Figure 1. Frequency of topics of divergence of interests and effects on mood and relationship satisfaction. The crossing horizontal and vertical lines represent the grand mean for mood and relationship satisfaction in this sample when people encountered a situation of divergence of interests. The size of the bubble area represent the frequency of occurrence. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

these effects are specific to empathy and are not because of the tendency to experience negative emotions in general.

Discussion

Using experience sampling, we tracked people's daily relationship life and assessed the effects of encountering divergence of interests with one's partner. Results indicated that encountering these situations has a negative impact on people's mood, stress, and relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, our results indicated that empathy exacerbates the negative consequences of encountering divergence of interests. Specifically, empathy was associated with greater negative mood and stress when encountering divergence of interests, and with reduced relationship satisfaction in those with high (vs. low) empathy.

The present work informs relationship science on the effects of encountering divergences of interests with one's partner in daily life. The content of everyday divergences of interests regards mundane preferences that most people would not consider very threatening for the individual or the relationship (i.e., which recreational activity to do together, who will carry the daily chores, how to coordinate their time together, etc.). Nevertheless, our findings show that people feel bad and stressed about these situations, and are more dissatisfied with their relationship. However, lagged analyses did not show that the amount of divergence of interests experienced in the 8 days of the experience sampling predicted changes in relationship satisfaction 1 year later. This may be because of the fact that the amount of divergence of interests encountered in the week of the experience sampling does not represent the couple's average week across a longer time frame. Alternatively, it might be that other relationship processes have a stronger impact on relationship satisfaction over time than the frequency of divergence of interests.

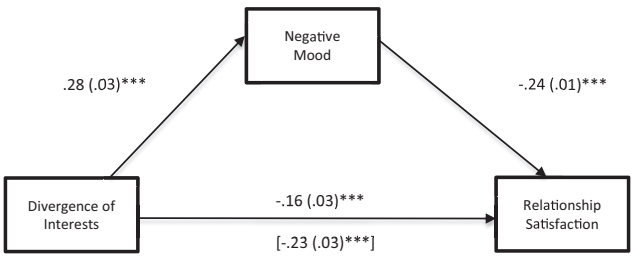

Figure 2. Negative mood as a mediator of the effect of divergence of interests on relationship satisfaction. All reported values are unstandardized estimates (*b* values), with their *SE*s reported between brackets. Between "[ ]" are the values for the total effect of divergence of interests on relationship satisfaction. *Note.* * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

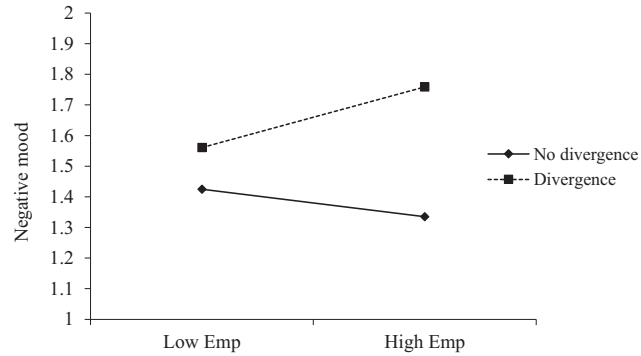

Figure 3. Negative mood as a function of participants' empathic concern and encountering divergence of interests.

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In addition, our work informs the literature on empathy and interpersonal processes, showing, to our knowledge for the first time, that empathy can sometimes hurt individuals who are confronted with the negative affect of their partner while also experiencing negative affect themselves. Future research should investigate the longitudinal implications of divergence of interests for the individual's well-being and whether these longitudinal implications might be especially harmful for empathic individuals. Our results showed that divergence of interests creates stress and, if repeatedly encountered, these situations can undermine the individual's psychological, physical, and relational well-being over time (Gere & Schimmack, 2013; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). To the extent that individuals with higher levels of empathy have stronger negative reactions to situations where partners' interests diverge, the cumulative effects of divergence of interests might be especially stressful for empathic individuals. In line with this prediction, recent research in developmental psychology has found that high-empathy adolescents are more likely to suffer the consequences of conflicts with their parents and more likely to develop emotion dysregulation over time compared with low empathy adolescents (van Lissa, Hawk, & Meeus, 2015). However, alternatively, it might also be that, although empathic individuals might become especially distressed in relationships with frequent divergence of interests, this distress might motivate them to try to communicate and function better with their partner, which, ultimately, could have long-term beneficial effects on the relationship.

Furthermore, future research could extend our findings and examine whether empathy intensifies the negative effects not only of encountering situations of divergence of interests but also when partners experience common problems (e.g., financial problems, problems with children, etc.). In all the situations in which both partners experience pain or discomfort, empathy may represent a risk factor that can intensify the negative outcomes. Finally, although these effects are more likely to occur in relational contexts characterized by strong interdependence and interpersonal closeness, future research could explore whether empathy might burden individuals also in different contexts, such as, for example, when managers have to make difficult decisions (i.e., whether to fire someone), when colleagues experience a conflict, and other situations in which two people are interdependent and they both experience distress.

Finally, we should acknowledge some limitations of this work. First, although we assumed that individuals high in empathic concerns feel discomfort for their partner, we did not directly assess this interpersonal discomfort. Second, although experience sampling methodology has many advantages because it reduces memory biases and enhances ecological validity, the data derived from such methodology are correlational and causal claims should be taken cautiously.

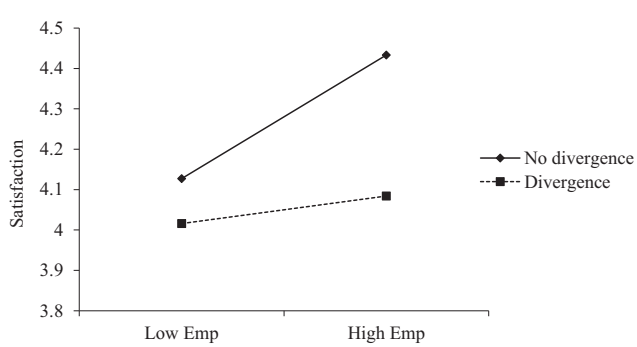

Figure 4. Relationship satisfaction as a function of participants' empathic concern and encountering divergence of interests.

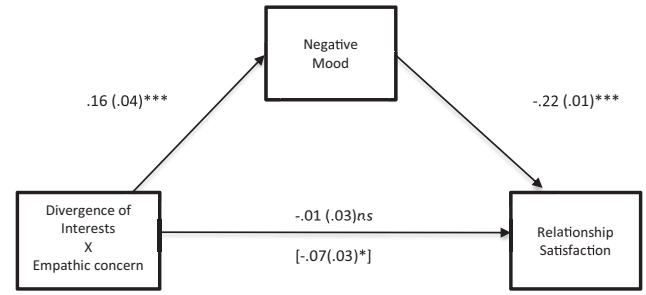

Figure 5. Negative mood as a mediator of the interactive effect of divergence of interests and empathic concern on relationship satisfaction. All reported values are unstandardized estimates (*b* values), with their *SE*s reported between brackets. Between "[ ]" are the values for the total effect of divergence of interests on relationship satisfaction. *Note.* * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Concluding Remarks

Most of the divergence of interests that couples encounter in their everyday life reflect the inescapable necessities of human (social) life: how to organize their free time, which food to consume, who will clean the kitchen today, whether to spend time together or not, and so on. However, these situations have a negative impact on the individual and on the relationship satisfaction. This is further exacerbated by empathy. People who feel the discomfort, not only for themselves but also for others, are more likely to be negatively affected by these situations. The present findings emphasize the burdens (rather than the benefits) of empathy by showing that situations that pose challenges to relationships—situations in which preferences diverge—seem especially discomforting and even stressful to those who are more prone to share the feelings of others. This discomfort may eventually undermine relationship satisfaction, even though all this may just have started by a pretty mundane divergence of interest, such as deciding which TV show to watch or who cooks today.

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