

Don't Sweat It: Exploring the Relationship Between Emotion Coherence and Well-Being in Couples

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Background

- Coherence, or emotional concordance, is an alignment across multiple emotional response systems (e.g. physiological, behavioral, and experiential).
- Subjective experience-physiology coherence may have functional implications, such that greater coherence should be evident in individuals who are aware of and accepting of their own mental states (Mauss et al., 2005).
- Prior empirical work has demonstrated that active attempts to suppress or alter emotional states disrupts alignment between emotional experience and physiology resulting in weaker coherence (e.g., Butler et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, individuals who are less likely to use such emotion regulation strategies and instead accept their emotions more have been shown to exhibit greater coherence and report higher well-being (Sommerfeldt et al., 2019).
- The emotion coherence literature has often assumed that emotional acceptance and suppression are inversely related (e.g., higher suppression=lower acceptance). However, this is an assumption that may not always hold true.
- For example, during a primarily negative context, an individual exhibiting greater coherence may be more likely to suppress unpleasant and accept pleasant emotions, resulting in increased use of both. In contrast, other individuals may be less likely to use either strategy and instead opt to cope in an entirely different way.
- In the current study, we assessed the link between coherence and well-being during a negative conversation where couples were asked to discuss what they disliked about their partner and what they would like them to change. We aimed to expand on prior work by further exploring this relationship through the mediating roles of emotional acceptance and suppression separately, which lead us to the following:

Hypothesis: Higher coherence will result in higher state-level well-being (measured by the presence of positive emotion and absence of negative emotion).

Research Question: Do different types of emotional regulation mediate the association between coherence and well-being?

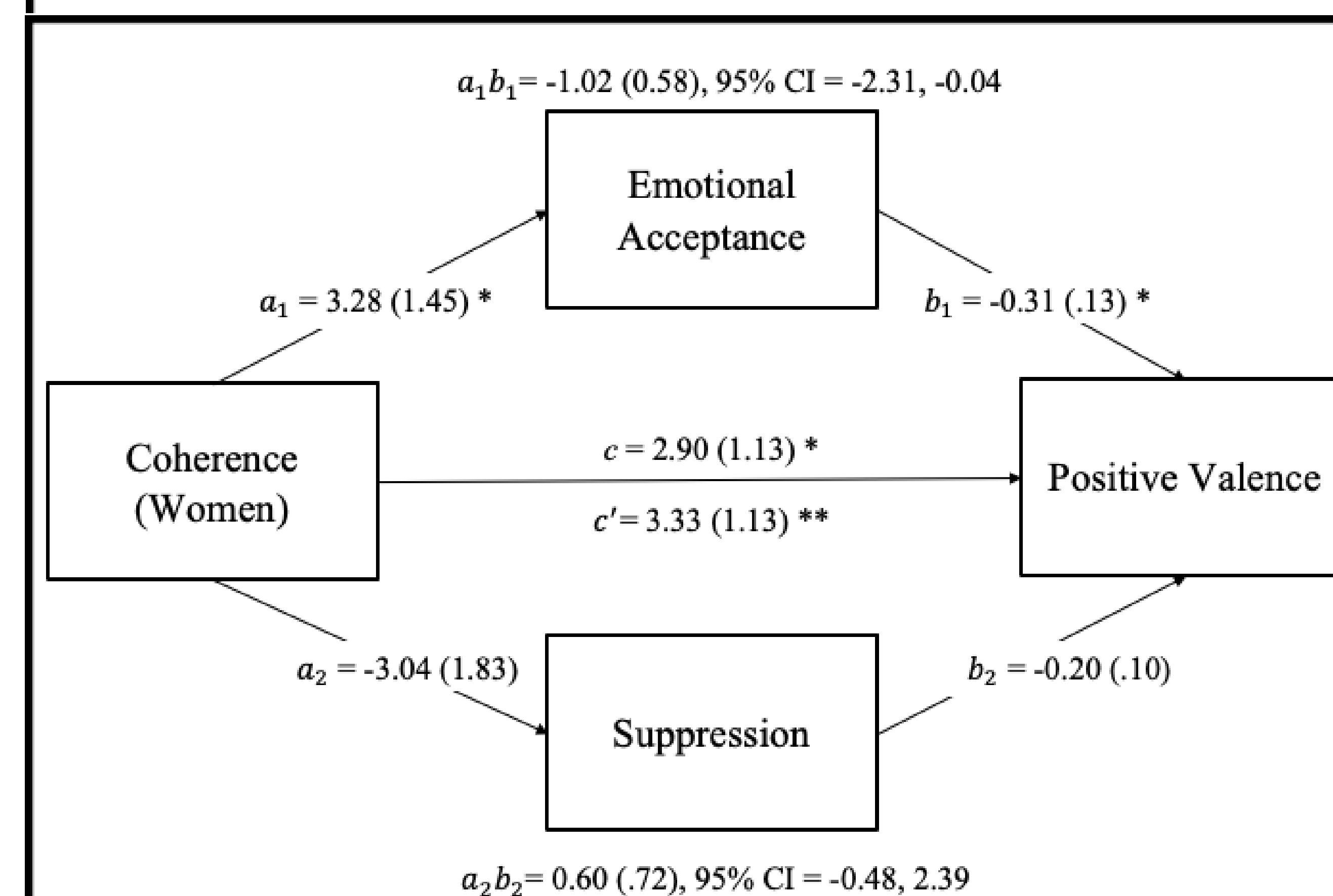
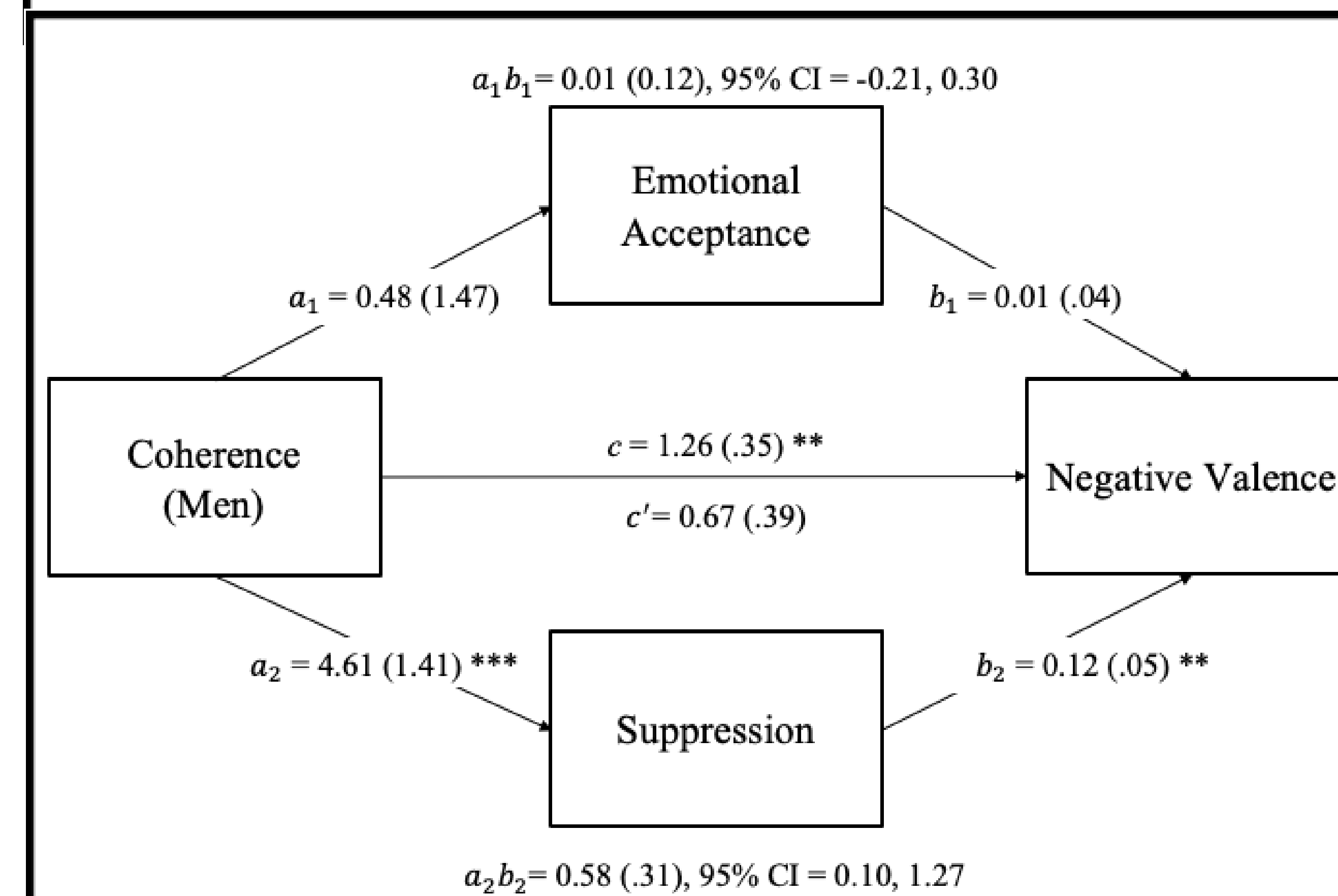
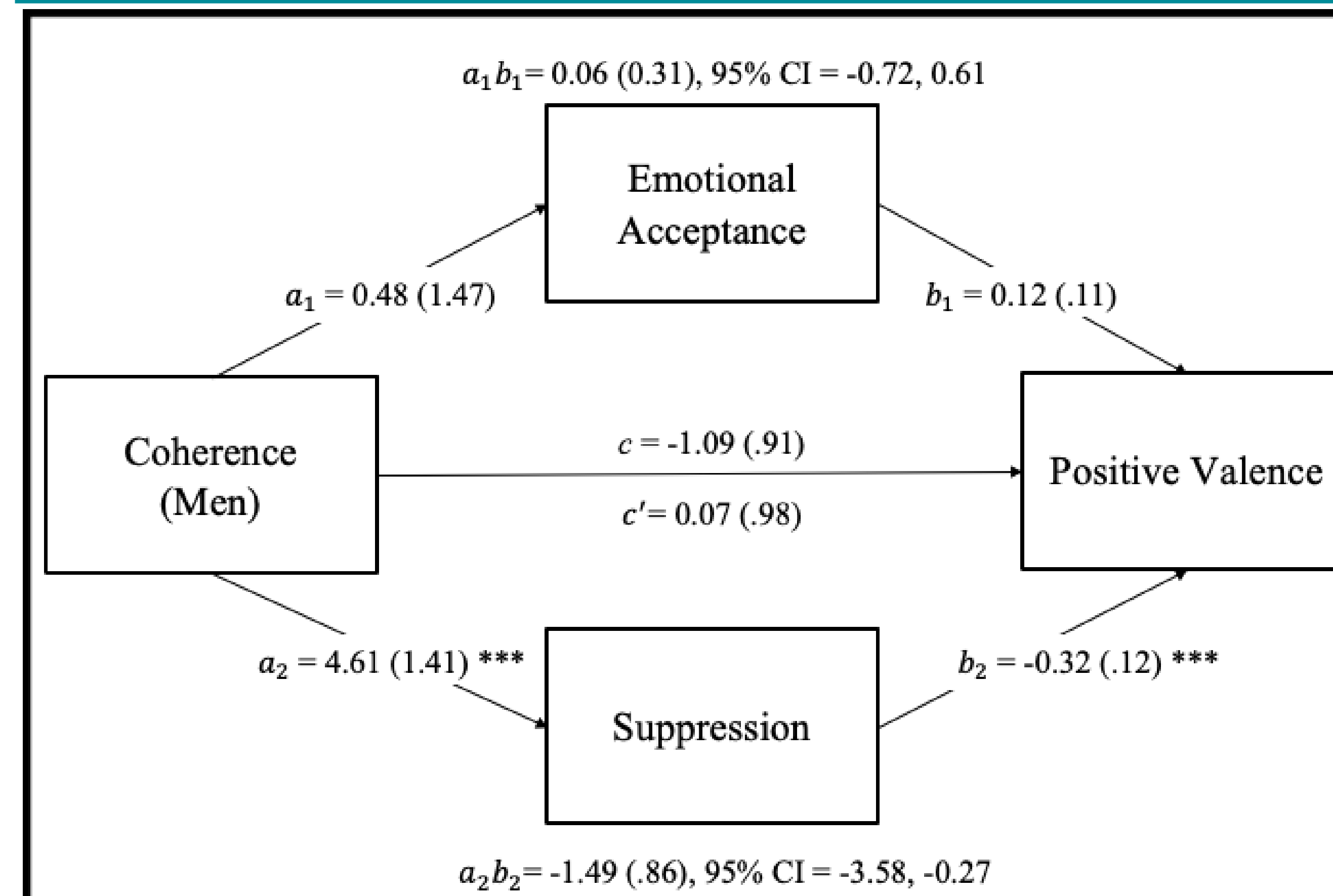
Method

Sample: The data comes from a larger longitudinal study of health behavior and weight change in heterosexual romantic couples during their first year of cohabitation. This data includes 63 couples who completed a mixed-emotion conversation in the laboratory. Participants ranged from 18-69 years old (M=27, SD=9). 50% of the sample consisted of college students.

Measures:

- **Physiological Response:** Skin Conductance (SC) was measured using MindWare and segmented into 10 second intervals
- **Experiential Response:** Following the task, participants used a dial measure to continuously rate their emotions throughout the conversation on a scale of 0-5 (0=very negative, 5=very positive). This was segmented into 10 second intervals.
- **Well-Being:** Participants took a survey on a scale of 0-4 (0=not at all, 4=a large amount) on 5 elements of positive emotions and 5 elements of negative emotions, where scores were composited
- **Emotional Acceptance:** 3 items on survey gauging awareness and acceptance of emotions on 7-point scale (-3=very much disagree, 3=very much agree), completed after doing the task
- **Suppression:** 3 items on survey gauging awareness and repression of emotions on 7-point scale, completed after doing the task

Results



Cross-Correlations: Our measure of coherence comes from cross-correlations. SC and emotional experience were correlated across time. In this way, one measure of coherence was created per participant.

Parallel Mediation Analyses: The data for male and female participants were evaluated separately in R. Bootstrapping intervals were used for both to measure direct and indirect effects.

Men:

- Men with high coherence reported less positive and more negative valence following a conversation.
- Men that have high coherence reported feeling negative and subsequently had a high SC response to reflect that.
- Suppression as an emotion regulation technique significantly mediated this association.

Women:

- Women with low coherence reported less positive valence following a conversation.
- Women that have low coherence reported feeling negative, yet had a low SC response that did not reflect that.
- Acceptance as an emotion regulation technique significantly mediated this association.

Conclusions and Implications

Hypothesis:

- This study goes against our primary hypothesis and shows that coherence may be negatively correlated to well-being. This is most likely due to coherence operating differently in these negative contexts. This differs from contexts involving stress. This is especially shown by men who were highly coherent reporting higher negative valence.
- For men, suppression mediated the association between coherence and lower state-level well-being (less positive, more negative valence) Men are denying their emotions, which is not effective.
- For women, emotional acceptance mediated this association (less positive valence). Women are not physiologically mirroring what they are feeling. This may lead them to accept emotions more. Yet, they still report less positive valence just by facing and accepting those negative emotions.

Research Question:

- We found that emotional acceptance and suppression mediated the association between coherence and well-being, but in different ways in men and women. This study was not meant to show sex differences, yet there are some clear ones that stood out in our analyses.
- Men may use suppression as a strategy to avoid conflict, while women may use emotional acceptance as a strategy to keep the peace.
- Women may also be attempting to reframe their emotions through a different mediator we did not measure here, such as reappraisal.

Further research could go into more evaluation on why sex differences are so prominent in the relationship between experience-physiology coherence and well-being. Research could also go into manipulating the types of emotional regulation to see if this disrupts the association in a way that wouldn't rely on self-report data.

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