Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
1996, Vol. 70, No. 1, 79-98

0022-3514/96/$3.00

The Benefits of Positive Illusions: Idealization and the Construction of Satisfaction in Close Relationships

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It is proposed that satisfaction is associated with idealistic, rather than realistic, perceptions of one's partner. To provide baselines for assessing relationship illusions, both members of married and dating heterosexual couples were asked to rate themselves and their partners on a variety of interpersonal attributes. Participants also rated the typical and ideal partner on these attributes. Path analyses revealed that individuals' impressions of their partners were more a mirror of their self-images and ideals than a reflection of their partners' self-reported attributes. Overall, intimates saw their partners in a more positive light than their partners saw themselves. Furthermore, these idealized constructions predicted greater satisfaction. Individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealized their partners and their partners idealized them. Taken together, these results suggest that a certain degree of idealization or illusion may be a critical feature of satisfying dating and even marital relationships.

> In the case of love, realities model themselves enthusiastically on one's desires . . . it is the passion in which violent desire is most completely satisfied. (Beyle Stendhal, *De L'Amour*)

As Stendhal's musings in *De L'Amour* illustrate, people immersed in the experience of romantic love often appear to bend reality to the will of their hopes and desires. Rather than being constrained by the sometimes-disappointing reality of their partners' actual attributes, individuals may view their partners through the rosy filters provided by images of ideal partners. Within such idealized constructions, intimates may even see virtues in one another's apparent faults. For example, individuals may preserve feelings of confidence in their romantic relationships—in the face of the doubts posed by a partner's failings—by weaving stories that depict such faults in the best possible light (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994).

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Portions of this research were presented at the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships convention held in Groningen, The Netherlands in July 1994. This research was prepared with the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) doctoral fellowship to Sandra L. Murray and SSHRC research grants. We thank Michael Ross and Mark Zanna for their comments on an earlier version of this article. We also thank Harry Reis for his comments on various aspects of this research and for suggesting Shaw's pithy quote. We are especially grateful to Alisa Lennox, Teresa Pizzamiglio, Renata Snidr, and Stephen Taylor for their assistance in conducting this research.

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But is idealization the key to enduring happiness, or does it only leave people vulnerable to inevitable disappointments and disillusionment? Psychologists often depict idealization as a dangerous malady associated only with the early infatuation period (e.g., Brickman, 1987). After all, because few individuals are perfect, increased interdependence should reveal the many ways in which an intimate falls short of one's hopes and ideals (e.g., Brehm, 1992). Continuing to idealize one's partner in the face of negative evidence should then impede adjustment, particularly if intimates love only the idealized image they construct. In this light, understanding the reality of a partner's virtues and faults may prove to be the key to enduring satisfaction, whereas idealization may leave intimates vulnerable to dashed hopes and expectations.

Despite such arguments, growing evidence suggests that "positive illusions" about the self are critical for adjustment and mental health (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980). In this article, we propose a related perspective on relationship illusions, arguing that a certain degree of idealization is critical for satisfying dating and even marital relationships.

The Idealization Process: Seeing What One Wants to See

> Love to faults is always blind,
> Always is to joy inclined,
> Lawless, winged, and unconfined,
> And breaks all chains from every mind. (William Blake, 1791)

Early on in romantic relationships, intimates' absorption in their partners' virtues fuels their hopes for their relationship's success (Holmes & Boon, 1990; Weiss, 1980). Self-presentation, interaction across restricted, positive domains, and intimates' desire not to perceive negativity all likely strengthen the perception that the partner really is the "right" person (e.g., Brehm, 1988; Brickman, 1987). Intimates' models of the ideal relationship also may help them fill in the gaps in their limited knowledge about their partners, a process of wish fulfillment in

which realities become a reflection of their desires (e.g., Murstein, 1971). The allure of a partner's apparent virtues draws individuals into their relationships, creating feelings of confidence and hope that belie the lack of more representative experiences.

As interdependence increases, individuals begin interacting across broader, more conflictual domains, and the potential for partners to exhibit negative behaviors increases (e.g., Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Levinger, 1983). Even in marriage, intimates may continue to uncover new sources of conflict as new demands surface, such as balancing a career and children (e.g., Hackel & Ruble, 1992). In fact, the potential for recurrent negativity may be greatest in marriage because of the strength and diversity of the bonds connecting husbands and wives. Discovering such harsh realities may then threaten intimates' hopes and idealized perceptions by raising the disturbing possibility that one's partner really is not the "right" person after all.

In the face of existing commitments, such competing hopes and doubts likely intensify intimates' need to reach confident, unequivocal conclusions about their partners (Brehm, 1988; Brickman, 1987; Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987; Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Paradoxically, then, suffering the inevitable disappointments of romantic life might actually strengthen idealized perceptions rather than tarnishing them. For instance, Hillary might quell her disappointment in Bill's stubbornness during conflicts by interpreting it as integrity rather than as egocentrism. Alternatively, she might try to excuse this fault by embellishing Bill's generally tolerant nature. As these examples illustrate, sustaining confidence in an intimate partner may necessitate weaving an elaborate story (or fiction) that both embellishes a partner's virtues and minimizes faults (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994).

This argument rests on the general assumption that a partner's qualities cannot be directly perceived. Instead, behavior must be interpreted and given meaning, motives for that behavior must be inferred, and, most indirectly of all, impressions of a partner's personal characteristics must be constructed (e.g., Gergen, Hepburn, & Fisher, 1986; Griffin & Ross, 1991). As a result, intimates need not be bound by only one possible interpretation of one another's virtues and faults as dictated by some stern objective reality. Instead, given the license in the storytelling process, individuals may come to see their partners in highly idealized ways (e.g., Hall & Taylor, 1976; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Constraining Desire: A Role for Reality?

Even from a social constructionist perspective one must admit that "objective" reality constrains and structures an individual's interpretation of the social world. If intimates are even reasonably accurate social perceivers, their representations should at least partially reflect their partners' actual virtues and faults. After all, only characters in fairy tales can turn frogs into princes or princesses. Some mixture of social construction and reality must underlie people's images of their partners. These representations might best be conceptualized in terms of an additive model that apportions part of the variance in perceptions to "construction" and part to "reality," as the following conceptual equation illustrates: actor's perception = reality of partner + actor's construction.

But given the difficulty of pinpointing "objective" truths, we're faced with a dilemma: How can we measure the actor's constructions without knowledge of the partner's "real" qualities or "true" nature? In the absence of a gold standard for reality, we turned to partners' own perspective on their virtues and faults. Investigators typically use such self-ratings as indexes of individuals' personality traits, despite the necessary caveats associated with using self-reports to estimate reality. Using this subjective reality baseline allows the separation of the reality-based and the constructed aspects of individuals' representations of their partners, as this adaptation of our initial model illustrates: actor's perception = partner's reality + actor's construction.

For example, Hillary's perception of Bill may partly reflect Bill's own reality, as defined by his self-perceptions, and partly reflect her construction. In our thinking, Hillary's perceptions may diverge from Bill's reality for both cognitive and motivational reasons. From a more cognitive perspective, Hillary's idiosyncratic theories about which traits cluster together in most people may guide her construction. Alternatively, Hillary might come to see Bill in much different ways than he sees himself if she relies on different contexts and experiences as her information base. From a more motivational perspective, Hillary's desire to see Bill in a particular way, perhaps as her own ideal partner, may also structure the nature of her constructions.

In contemplating our index of partners' realities, it is critical to note that we are not arguing that individuals possess true insight into the actual nature of their own attributes. In fact, there is every reason to believe that individuals' self-perceptions are in part constructions. For instance, individuals typically see themselves in much more positive, idealized ways than their actual attributes appear to warrant (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). But given this evidence of self-aggrandizement, individuals' self-views may provide a conservative benchmark for indexing the idealized nature of their partners' perceptions (i.e., Hillary's illusions about Bill must surpass his own illusions about himself).[1]

In this article, we explore three separate questions concerning the nature of intimates' representations of reality. First, do actors' impressions of their partners mirror their partners' self-perceptions? This is the question of convergence, or "reality matching." Or do actors' impressions of their partners diverge systematically from their partners' self-perceptions? This is the related question of projection. Second, do intimates tend to view their partners more positively than their partners view themselves? This is the question of distortion in perceptions. Finally, do intimates' unique, idealized constructions of one another's attributes predict greater satisfaction? This is the question of function.

Individuals' perceptions of their partners' attributes should

[1] An alternative argument is that actors actually know their partners better than their partners know themselves. If this were the case, calling Hillary's idiosyncratic perception of Bill an "illusion" may be a misnomer. However, if actors' own self-images and ideals shape these idiosyncratic perceptions, as we explore, such evidence of wish fulfillment should undercut the actor's status as an unbiased arbiter of truth.

mirror their partners' self-perceptions to the extent that they both reflect a shared social reality. Indeed, considerable evidence suggests that social perceivers often agree on one another's attributes (e.g., Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Such convergence, or "reality matching" is reflected in the shaded area of Figure 1. In the domain of romantic relationships, such evidence of mutual understanding may be an integral part of the intimacy process (McCall, 1974; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

But if idiosyncratic construal also plays a preeminent role in shaping representations, as we expect, such realities may diverge and individuals may see their partners in much different ways than their partners see themselves. Such constructions are reflected in the hatched area of Figure 1. We believe that individuals' desire to see their partners in the best possible light biases the nature of their constructions. In particular, we expect actors to see their partners in a more positive, idealized way than their partners see themselves. In the current research, we explored how self- and relationship schemas might structure impressions in such ways that sometimes harsh relationship realities become reflections of intimates' wishes.

The Projection of Self and Ideals

In terms of self-schemas (e.g., Markus & Zajonc, 1985), intimates might project their own virtues onto their partners, including their partners in their own illusory self-views. Seeing oneself in one's partner is even thought to be a sign of a close, interdependent relationship (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Such projection may occur because traits that are schematic for the self represent a general "value system" that guides perception. More purely motivational biases may also underlie projection. Seeing oneself in one's partner may foster a sense of predictability that is critical for feelings of security (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Also, individuals might affirm their own self-images by assuming that their partners are just like them, only slightly better (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1978).

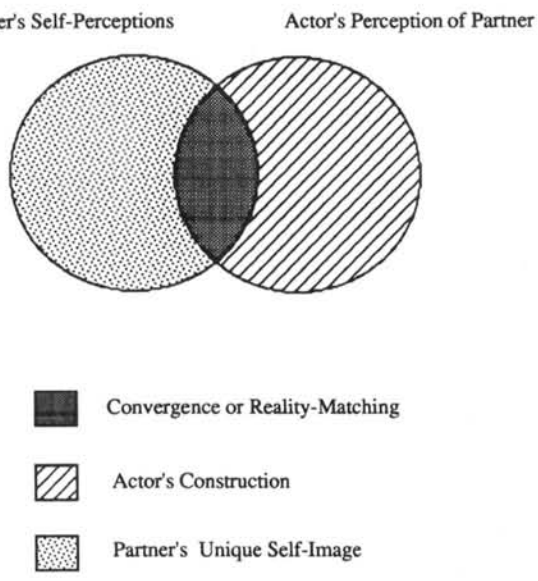

Figure 1. Isolating the constructed and reality-based components of actors' representations of their partners.

As an even more direct path to wish fulfillment, intimates may see one another's attributes through the rosy filter provided by their images of the ideal partner (e.g., Murstein, 1967, 1971). Such ideals represent individuals' working models of the attributes they hope and perhaps need to find in an intimate partner if they are to feel secure in their commitment (e.g., Bowlby, 1977). Like other relationship schemas, ideals may provide a template for shaping intimates' construal of their partners' attributes (Baldwin, 1992).

Beginning with Bowlby (1982), attachment theorists have argued that models of self and other are intricately related. This suggests that individuals' idiosyncratic models of the ideal partner should be conditional on their own sense of self-worth. Individuals with a stronger sense of self-worth should set higher ideals, whereas individuals with a weaker sense of self-worth should expect less from an intimate partner. If self- and ideal models are tied in this way, ideals may mediate the hypothesized link between self-perceptions and impressions of a romantic partner.

This prediction stems from writings in both the exchange (e.g., LaPrelle, Hoyle, Insko, & Bernthal, 1990; Murstein, 1967, 1971; Murstein & Beck, 1972; Wetzel & Insko, 1982) and psychodynamic (e.g., Karp, Jackson, & Lester, 1970; Mathes & Moore, 1985; Reik, 1957) traditions. For instance, LaPrelle et al. (1990) argued that individuals are most attracted to similar others when these similar others fulfill their ideal selves. Similarly, Murstein (1967, 1971) argued that intimates attempt to find a mate who possesses the qualities they desire to see in themselves.

In summary, by using partners' self-impressions as "reality" benchmarks, we will explore whether actors project their self-images and ideals onto their partners, thereby seeing them differently, even more positively, than their partners see themselves. We hope to show that individuals' impressions of their partners are as much a mirror of their own self-images and ideals as a reflection of their partners' actual, or at least self-perceived, attributes.

Illusion, Idealization, and Satisfaction

> An illusion which makes me happy is worth a verity which drags me to the ground. (Christoph Martin Wieland, *Idris und Zemde, canto III*)

Sharing Wieland's sentiment, we believe that idealized constructions or positive illusions are a critical feature of satisfying dating and even marital relationships. Taylor and Brown (1988) have been the staunchest advocates of such a perspective on illusion, arguing that illusions about the self promote healthy functioning. Such "positive illusions," including idealized self-perceptions, exaggerated perceptions of control, and unrealistic optimism, appear to function as buffers, protecting self-esteem in the face of the threats posed by negative information about the self. Also, individuals' perhaps illusory assumption that the world is in fact benevolent and meaningful may provide a sense of security in the face of uncertainty (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). From these perspectives, happiness

and contentment depend not on individuals' acceptance of a stern reality but on their ability to see themselves and their worlds in the best possible light.

In this article, we argue that feelings of satisfaction reflect intimates' ability to see imperfect partners in idealized ways (cf. Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). If illusions predict satisfaction, individuals should be happier in their relationships to the extent that they see their partners in an even more positive light than their partners' self-perceptions justify: a *projected illusions hypothesis.* These idealized constructions may prove to be just as important for feelings of satisfaction as the reality of the partner's actual, or at least self-perceived, attributes. We also expected individuals to be happier in their relationships to the extent that their partners idealize them: a *reflected illusions hypothesis.* Such unconditional positive regard—a sense of being valued and accepted in spite of one's faults and imperfections—may prove to be the key to satisfying romantic relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988). From this perspective, satisfied couples may appear to be living a shared illusion, colluding to see the best in one another (Gurman, 1978).

Our emphasis on shared illusions, however, contrasts with the compelling notion that understanding the reality of a partner's attributes is the key to continued relationship satisfaction (e.g., Kobak & Hazan, 1991). In this light, recognizing truths, even harsh truths, provides the foundation for satisfying romantic relationships by facilitating interpersonal adjustment and accommodation. Individuals should therefore be happier to the extent that they see their partners as they "really" are, rather than as a reflection of their own hopes and ideals. Furthermore, being idealized may only detract from feelings of satisfaction if individuals really want their partners to see them as they see themselves (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992). For example, in a sample of married respondents, Swann and his colleagues (1992) found that individuals were more committed to their relationships to the extent that their partners verified their self-perceptions, even when this involved confirming a negative self-concept. From this perspective, satisfaction depends on converging realities: actors' impressions mirroring or verifying their partners' self-perceptions.

The purpose of this research was to contrast the roles of converging realities and idealized constructions in predicting feelings of satisfaction. Although intimates' accurate understanding of one another's attributes may well be an important aspect of satisfying relationships, we believe that intimates' idealized constructions or "positive illusions" may have an even greater bearing on satisfaction. In satisfying relationships, the pleasure principle may overwhelm the reality principle.

Method

Overview

This research was designed to examine the role of "positive illusions" in dating and marital relationships. To explore our hypotheses, we asked our respondents to describe themselves and their partners on a variety of positive and negative attributes. These individuals also described the typical and ideal partner on these attributes as further benchmarks for assessing idealized constructions. A global measure of relationship satisfaction served as our criterion. We administered these scales to both partners in samples of 98 heterosexual dating couples and 82 heterosexual married couples.

Participants

Married sample. Sixty-nine couples volunteered to participate in a study on thoughts and feelings in close relationships at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Thirteen additional couples from introductory psychology classes at the University of Waterloo also participated, creating a total sample of 82 couples. Of the total sample, 60 couples were married, 11 couples were cohabiting, and 11 couples were engaged.[2] The mean age was 30.5 years. The average duration of their relationships was 6.5 years. The average number of children was 2.1 among the 33 couples who had children. Our science center respondents received a paper on constructive problem-solving skills as a token of our appreciation for their participation. Our University of Waterloo respondents received either course credit or $5.

Dating sample. Ninety-eight dating couples volunteered to participate in a study on thoughts and feelings in dating relationships held at the University of Waterloo. Five of these couples described themselves as casually dating; the remaining couples described themselves as exclusively dating. The mean age was 19.5 years, and they had been dating 19.0 months on average. Participants received course credit or payment for participating.

Procedure

Married sample. In recruiting our married sample, we posted a sign promoting the study in the main hall of the Ontario Science Centre. This sign invited married, cohabiting, or engaged couples to participate in a questionnaire study on thoughts and feelings in close relationships. The experimenter first introduced the study to the volunteers and then gave them packets containing the questionnaires and the instruction sheets. In her instructions, the experimenter cautioned couples to complete the measures without comparing their responses with their partners'. On completion of the measures, participants placed their questionnaires within sealed envelopes and returned them to the experimenter. She then thanked the participants and gave them the short feedback paper on constructive problem-solving skills.

Dating sample. We invited introductory psychology students who were currently involved in dating relationships to participate in a questionnaire study on thoughts and feelings in close relationships. On their arrival at the laboratory, the experimenter first gave a brief introduction to the study and then asked participants to complete the questionnaires. If both members of the couple were present in the laboratory session, we placed them at separate tables and asked them to complete their questionnaires independently. Once the participants finished, the experimenter explained the purpose of the study and answered any questions.

If only one member of the couple could attend the laboratory session, we asked these participants if their partners might also be willing to complete the questionnaires. If the participants agreed, we then sent their partners the questionnaire and a letter inviting them to participate in the study. Again, we cautioned these participants to complete the questionnaire without discussing their responses with their partners. On receiving their completed questionnaires, we sent these participants an explanation of the study and a check for $5.[3]

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[2] All of the results we present remained consistent whether we based our analyses solely on the married couples or on the combined sample of married, cohabiting, and engaged couples.

[3] One hundred eight individuals attended the laboratory sessions. However, 10 individuals' partners did not return their questionnaires, leaving a total sample of 98 dating couples.

Measures

The questionnaires for both the married and dating couples included (a) our interpersonal qualities scales, tapping individuals' perceptions of themselves, their partner, their ideal partner, and the typical partner; (b) a measure of self-esteem; and (c) a global index of relationship satisfaction.[4] The first page of each questionnaire asked respondents for the following demographic information: gender, age, relationship status (i.e., married, cohabiting, engaged, dating), relationship length, and number of children (if applicable).

Interpersonal qualities scale. In developing our 21-item measure of interpersonal qualities, we selected positive and negative attributes from the interpersonal circle (e.g., Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979), a model based on the primary dimensions of warmth–hostility and dominance–submissiveness. These traits were as follows: kind and affectionate, open and disclosing, patient, understanding, responsive to my needs, tolerant and accepting, critical and judgmental, lazy, controlling and dominant, emotional, moody, thoughtless, irrational, distant, complaining, and childish. We also selected a number of attributes often considered to represent commodities in the social exchange process (e.g., Rubin, 1973), including self-assured, sociable or extraverted, intelligent, witty, and traditional. For both married and dating samples, principal-components analyses (varimax rotation) on both self- and partner ratings yielded parallel three-factor solutions consistent with our expectations. These three factors largely reflected virtues (e.g., understanding), faults (e.g., complaining), and social commodities (e.g., intelligent and witty).

To provide a number of different baselines for assessing positive constructions, we asked participants to describe themselves, their own partner, the ideal partner, and the typical partner on this attribute measure. In defining the "ideal partner," we attempted to ensure that participants described their own idiosyncratic hopes for an ideal partner rather than some cultural ideal or standard. Therefore, we asked them to describe their own unique standard for the ideal partner in terms of their perceptions of how they would most prefer their current partner to be. We defined the "typical partner" as possessing those traits or attributes that participants believed to be most descriptive of the general population of partners. Participants rated how well each of the traits described the target (e.g., self, partner, typical, ideal) on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic*, 9 = *completely characteristic*). The order of the attribute ratings for the different targets was partially counterbalanced across subjects.

Self-esteem. Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item measure assessed participants' global self-evaluation (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"). Participants responded to such items on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*).

Satisfaction. We designed the three-item satisfaction scale to assess participants' global evaluation of their relationships. These items were (a) "I am extremely happy with my relationship," (b) "I have a very strong relationship with my partner," and (c) "I do not feel that my relationship is successful" (reverse scored). Participants responded to these items on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, 9 = *completely true*).

Personal Attributes Questionnaire. A subset of our dating respondents (n = 56) completed Pelham and Swann's (1989) 10-item Personal Attributes Questionnaire (e.g., musical ability, physical attractiveness, athletic ability). Participants rated both themselves and their partners on a 10-point scale, indicating where they (or their partner) stood on the qualities relative to others (i.e., bottom 5% of the population through top 5% of the population).

Results

In exploring our hypotheses, we first discuss the question of convergence or reality matching (i.e., whether individuals see their partners as their partners see themselves). We then explore whether individuals project their self-images and ideals onto their intimates, essentially constructing impressions of the partner they most hope to see. Finally, we examine the potential benefits and liabilities of these idealized constructions. Do positive illusions predict greater satisfaction? Or are the most satisfied individuals those who validate one another's self-concepts, seeing one another as they "really" are? Before we turn to our results, we first debate possible methods for statistically indexing the "constructed" and "reality-based" aspects of intimates' impressions of their partners.

Analytic Strategy: Providing Estimates for "Reality" and "Illusion"

Ever since Cronbach's (1955) classic article, social psychologists have been aware of the difficulties inherent in measuring agreement or similarity between two individuals' perceptions. There are two common approaches to assessing the degree of similarity between individuals' impressions of their partners and their partners' self-perceptions. Correlational analyses answer one type of "similarity" question, whether intimates who have positive perceptions of their partners also have partners who have positive perceptions of themselves. Analyses of mean differences answer yet another type of similarity question, whether individuals see their partners in an equally positive (i.e., similar), more positive, or less positive light than their partners see themselves. As we explore later, these two approaches to indexing similarity address statistically and conceptually independent questions. The correlational approach assesses the degree of convergence between perceptions, whereas the mean differences approach assesses the existence of a systematic bias in perceptions.

Earlier, we described intimates' representations in terms of an additive model that apportioned part of the variance in their perceptions to "reality" and part to "construction" (i.e., actor's perception = partner's reality + actor's construction). Following a difference score approach, we could subtract the partner's reality from the actor's perceptions to obtain an index of construction or illusion. Unfortunately, creating these difference scores confounds, rather than separates, these two perceptions (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Humphreys, 1990; Johns, 1981). However, we can unconfound these factors by using path-analytic models to examine the constructed and reality-based components of intimates' representations of their partners.

Structural equations modeling, using a maximum-likelihood program such as LISREL, EQS, or CALIS (covariance analysis of linear structural equations) allows the simultaneous estimation of the path coefficients in a number of different equations. For instance, we could define the man's perception of the woman as part reality, part projection, and part unexplained variance or error. Similarly, we could define the woman's perception of the man as part reality, part projection, and part unexplained variance or error. This model of actors' perceptions of their partners is represented by the following equations:

[4] We also obtained measures of trust, love, commitment, conflict negativity, and ambivalence, but they are not the focus of the current investigation.

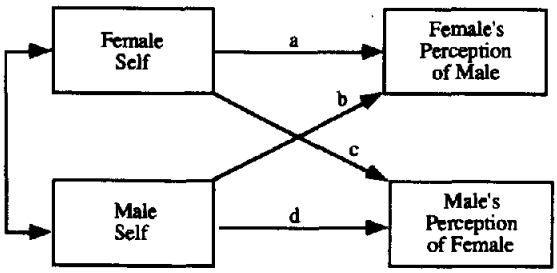

Figure 2. Constructing impressions: The projection of self.

man's perception of woman

$$= B_1 \text{ female self} + B_2 \text{ male self} + \text{Error 1}$$

woman's perception of man

$$= B_3 \text{ male self} + B_4 \text{ female self} + \text{Error 2}$$

In this structural model, B_1 indexes the reality component of the male's perceptions (i.e., whether he sees his partner as she sees herself, holding the man's self-image constant). More simply, B_1 assesses the male's understanding of his partner's self-perceptions. B_2 indexes one possible projection component of the man's perceptions (i.e., whether he tends to see himself in his partner, holding the reality of her attributes constant). That is, do aspects of the man's construction or "illusion" reflect his projection of his own attributes onto his partner?

As this example illustrates, we can index intimates' illusions statistically by partialing the effects of the partner's reality out of the actor's perceptions (i.e., by controlling for the partner's self-reports; e.g., B_1 or the shaded area in Figure 1). Actors' constructions, or "illusions," then refer to their idiosyncratic perceptions of their partners, what they see in their partners that their partners do not see in themselves (i.e., the hatched area in Figure 1). We can then explore whether the projection of self (e.g., B_2), for example, predicts the nature of these illusions.

Because of its ability to test the fit of competing models, structural equation modeling also allows one to test for gender differences in the path models. For example, one interesting question is whether men and women are equally attuned to the reality of their partners' attributes. We could test this hypothesis by comparing the fit of a model that estimates common "reality" coefficients for men and women to the fit of a model that estimates separate "reality" coefficients. If men and women do differ in their accuracy, the goodness of fit for the model estimating separate "reality" coefficients should be significantly better (i.e., a smaller chi-square) than the goodness of fit for the model estimating common "reality" coefficients (a 1-*df* test).

In constructing structural models, one must specify causal links among the variables in the model. For example, to construct the aforementioned model, we needed to specify unidirectional causal paths linking "female self" and "male self" to men's impressions and causal paths linking "female self" and "male self" to women's impressions (Figure 2 illustrates these causal linkages). In this case, these causal paths reflect our assumption that individuals' realities lead to their partners' impressions of them rather than vice versa. However, these causal arrows are only hypothetical (despite the illusion of causality that drawing arrows creates). The cross-sectional data we now discuss can index the magnitude of the hypothesized paths, but they cannot test any causal assumptions that we made in constructing each model.

The Nature of Intimates' Representations: Reality or Illusion?

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of the self-esteem index, the satisfaction index, and the interpersonal qualities scale (IQS) broken down by target and gender for married and dating couples. Table 2 shows the zero-order correlations among these measures for both samples. (The results for the married sample are based on the 75 couples who completed all of the reported measures.)

In the following analyses, individuals' mean ratings of themselves and their partners on the interpersonal qualities scale indexed the overall positivity of partners' realities and actors' impressions, respectively. In computing this trait perceptions index, negative traits were reverse scored, such that higher scores represented more favorable perceptions.

Estimating convergence or "reality matching." Do individuals' impressions of their partners mirror their partners' self-perceptions? First, at the level of zero-order correlations, we

Table 1
Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Self-Esteem Index, Satisfaction Index, and Interpersonal Qualities Scale

	Married sample					Dating sample				
		Men		Women			Men		Women	
Measure	α	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Self-perceptions	.74	6.18	0.68	6.30	0.79	.75	5.93	0.78	6.68	0.70
Perception of partner	.81	6.40	0.87	6.61	0.96	.80	6.64	0.78	6.77	0.87
Perception of the ideal partner	.80	7.16	0.68	7.53	0.65	.69	7.44	0.49	7.70	0.50
Perception of the typical partner	.89	5.56	0.77	5.69	1.04	.85	5.69	0.76	5.92	0.77
Self-esteem	.82	3.42	0.38	3.37	0.42	.86	3.38	0.41	3.25	0.47
Satisfaction	.84	7.97	1.21	8.04	1.08	.83	8.04	1.21	8.00	1.33

Table 2
Zero-Order Correlations Among Perceptions of Self, Partner, Ideal, Typical, and Satisfaction

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Female self	—	.32	.41	.20	.49	.29	.05	.31	.08	.00	−.04	.27
2. Female's view of partner	.57	—	.48	.22	.17	.59	.35	.40	.32	.13	.04	.44
3. Female ideal	.50	.51	—	−.01	.19	.53	.05	.38	.22	−.09	.13	.22
4. Female typical	.38	.35	.33	—	.10	.12	−.05	−.01	−.07	.09	.00	.12
5. Female self-esteem	.24	.18	.14	.08	—	.28	.05	.15	−.12	.17	−.03	.04
6. Female satisfaction	.38	.56	.27	.35	.09	—	.29	.46	.28	.07	.12	.47
7. Male self	.28	.32	.24	.22	.12	.15	—	.34	.60	.10	.35	.32
8. Male's view of partner	.42	.36	.27	.21	.13	.31	.48	—	.57	.00	−.01	.55
9. Male ideal	.21	.17	.20	.08	.06	.05	.47	.53	—	−.14	.20	.38
10. Male typical	.15	−.04	.05	.16	.04	−.07	.39	.25	.20	—	−.12	−.12
11. Male self-esteem	.20	.25	.31	.05	.05	−.04	.31	.26	.25	.19	—	.16
12. Male satisfaction	.14	.33	.27	.14	.09	.39	.16	.50	.28	.01	.17	—

Note. The correlations for the married sample are presented above the diagonal and the correlation for the dating sample are presented below the diagonal.

found significant but modest levels of convergence. In the married sample, men's impressions of their partners did reflect their partners' self-perceptions, $r(73) = .31$, $p < .01$, as did women's impressions, $r(73) = .35$, $p < .01$. In the dating sample, we found similar levels of "reality matching": Both men's, $r(96) = .45$, $p < .001$, and women's, $r(96) = .41$, $p < .001$, impressions reflected their partners' self-perceptions.

Clearly, individuals' global representations of their partners are not just a direct reflection of their partners' self-perceptions. Instead, there is still variance left to be explained in actors' impressions once we have accounted for the "reality" of partners' self-perceived attributes. Such evidence of diverging realities leaves open the possibility that projection and idiosyncratic construal play a role in shaping the nature of intimates' constructions. In particular, we predict that actors' constructions are shaped by their own self-perceptions and by their ideals.

Projecting the self. Figure 2 shows our most basic model of projection in romantic relationships. First, the double-arrowed line connecting male and female self-perceptions represents the zero-order correlation indexing the similarity between partners' self-perceptions. Paths b and c represent social reality, or convergence, effects. In other words, these paths index the extent to which people's representations of their partners mirror their partners' self-perceptions. Finally, Paths a and d index the role of projection, assessing the extent to which individuals see themselves in their partners. Note that each path in this model reflects a partial or unique effect. For example, Path a represents one source of the female's "illusion"—how much she tends to see herself in her partner, holding the reality of his actual attributes (Path b) constant.

To test this (and all subsequent) models, we used the structural equation modeling program within the CALIS procedure of SAS. As a general analytic strategy in examining this (and all subsequent models), we first fit models estimating separate path coefficients for men and women. In the preceding model, for example, we first allowed the "reality" and "projection" paths for men and women to differ. However, in this (and all other) cases, the size of these paths were strikingly similar for both men and women. As a result, we collapsed across gender in our analyses, presenting pooled (i.e., common) path coefficients for men and women.

Table 3 shows the pooled coefficients (standardized path coefficients) for the basic projection model for both married and dating couples. First, the pooled reality Paths b and c were significant for both samples, indicating that individuals' impressions of their partners were in part a reflection of their partners' "real," or at least self-perceived, attributes. More important, the pooled construction Paths a and d were at least as large as the reality paths for both married and dating couples. Individuals who saw themselves in a positive light projected their

Table 3
Constructing Impressions: The Projection of Self

	Married sample		Dating sample	
Predicting actor's perception of partner	Coefficient	*t*	Coefficient	*t*
Reality paths				
b and c: Reflection of partner's self-image	.304	4.22*	.240	3.99*
Construction paths				
a and d: Projection of actor's self-image	.315	4.33*	.456	7.63*

Note. $GFI_{(married)} = .99$, χ^2 (2, $N = 75$) = 0.67, *ns*. $GFI_{(dating)} = .98$, χ^2 (2, $N = 98$) = 4.19, *ns*. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.
*$p < .001$.

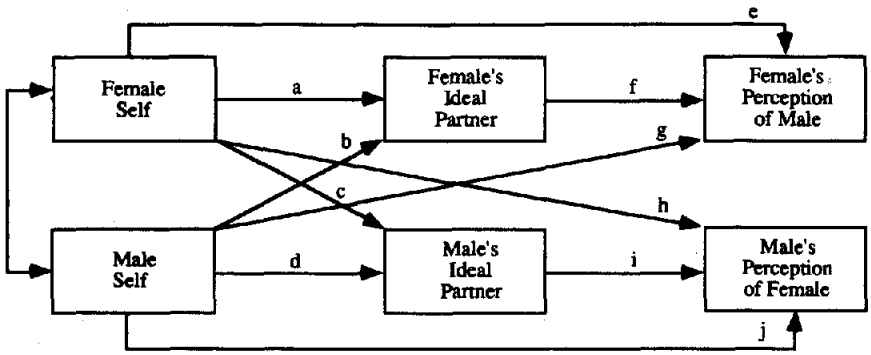

Figure 3. Constructing impressions: The projection of ideals.

rosy self-images onto their partners, whereas individuals with more negative self-images were less generous in their depictions. Finally, the similarity between partners' self-images, as indexed by the zero-order correlation, was minimal: $r(73) = .05$, *ns*, for married couples, and $r(96) = .24$, $p < .05$, for dating couples.

The results presented in Table 3 support our prediction that actors' impressions are in part constructions that reflect their projection of their own virtues and vices onto their partners. We also hypothesized that intimates might see their partners through the rosy filter provided by their ideals and hopes. Intimates' ideals may even mediate the link between self-perceptions and perceptions of others, as we suggested earlier.

Projecting ideals. Figure 3 shows the theoretical model derived from this prediction. As in Figure 2, Paths g and h represent social reality or convergence effects. New to this model, Paths a and d tap whether intimates' ideals reflect their own self-perceptions. Paths b and c assess whether ideals are also attuned to the "reality" of their partners' self-perceptions. Turning to our construction paths, Paths f and i index intimates' tendency to see their partners through the filters provided by their ideals, essentially seeing them, not as they are, but as they wish to see them. Finally, Paths e and j are direct projection paths, indexing whether actors see themselves in their partners, even when we control for the impact of their ideals.

Table 4 illustrates that married and dating couples' ideals were strongly related to their own self-perceptions (i.e., pooled Paths a and d were both highly significant). The better, or more positively, individuals felt about themselves, the higher were their hopes or expectations for the ideal partner. In contrast, the partner's actual qualities had little bearing on the ideal standards actors set; pooled Paths b and c were nonsignificant in both samples.

Also consistent with our predictions, married couples projected their ideals onto their partners, apparently seeing them through the filter provided by these working models, as the significant pooled projection Paths f and i illustrate. Self-perceptions had no significant direct effect on actors' perceptions once their ideals were included in the model (Paths e and j). Therefore, among married couples, ideals completely mediated the link between self-perceptions and representations of a romantic partner. In contrast, ideals only partially mediated this relation for dating couples. For dating men and women, actors' self-perceptions structured their impressions of their partners both directly, as the significant pooled Paths e and j illustrate, as well as indirectly, through the projection of their ideals (Paths f and i).[5]

Evidence for projection? The constructed aspects of intimates' representations—what they saw in their partners that their partners did not see in themselves—appear to reflect actors' tendency to see their partners through the filters provided by their hopes and ideals (Paths f and i). Higher hopes and ideals predicted rosier, more idealized impressions of an intimate partner. Among dating couples, more positive self-images also predicted more idealized impressions (Paths e and j). However, possible alternative interpretations of these results should be considered.

First, individuals might see themselves in their partners simply because they truly are alike. According to this logic, the apparent evidence for projection might simply be an artifact of actual similarity. However, the degree of actual similarity between partners' self-ratings was minimal. Furthermore, we controlled for this limited degree of similarity within our path models. Therefore, the "projection of self," or perceived similarity, paths we report were completely independent of the effects of actual similarity.

Second, our evidence for projected perceptions could simply be an artifact of method variance. Individuals rated their self-perceptions, ideals, and partners on the same attributes using the same response scales. In addition, our construction paths reflect within-person correlations (e.g., the female's ideals and her perception of her partner), whereas our reality paths reflect between-person correlations (e.g., the female's self-perceptions and the male's perception of her). As a result, shared variance may have artificially inflated the magnitude of the projection paths. Alternatively, our evidence for projection might be a result of global positivity. Individuals who see themselves and their partners in idealized ways may see almost everything in their worlds in idealized ways, a Pollyanna effect. If this is the case, intimates' seemingly illusory perceptions may not speak

[5] We also estimated the coefficients for the projection model separately for the virtues, faults, and social commodities subscales. The resulting coefficients paralleled those obtained using total scores, suggesting that idealization involves both attributing valued virtues to a partner and whitewashing possible faults.

Table 4
Constructing Impressions: The Projection of Self and Ideals

	Married sample		Dating sample	
	Coefficient	*t*	Coefficient	*t*
Predicting actor's ideal partner				
Paths b and c: Reflection of partner's self-image	.043	*ns*	.097	*ns*
Paths a and d: Projection of actor's self-image	.500	7.13*	.436	6.78*
Predicting actor's perceptions of partner				
Reality paths				
g and h: Reflection of partner's self-image	.285	4.39*	.210	3.73*
Construction paths				
e and j: Projection of actor's self-image	.087	*ns*	.307	4.98*
f and i: Projection of actor's ideals	.454	5.95*	.332	5.36*

Note. $GFI_{(married)} = .95$, χ^2 (7, N = 75) = 10.52, *ns*. $GFI_{(dating)} = .98$, χ^2 (7, N = 98) = 5.11, *ns*. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.
*$p < .001$.

to their specific idealization of their partners. Their impressions of the typical partner, for example, may be just as positive.

To explore these possibilities, we included both perceptions of the typical partner and global self-esteem as control variables within our model. Including typical ratings controls for method variance (as individuals made their self-, partner, ideal, and typical partner ratings on scales with identical traits and formats) as well as within-person variance. In addition to controlling for more mundane response biases, self-esteem and perceptions of the typical partner also control for individuals' general tendency to see themselves and their worlds in positive ways. Importantly, neither control variable changed the observed pattern of results. Our projection paths remained strong and significant when we controlled for perceptions of the typical partner and global self-esteem. Therefore, actors' apparent tendency to see their partners through the filters provided by their self-perceptions and ideals reflects something more than just method variance or global positivity. Instead, these idealized constructions are specific to actors' perceptions of their romantic partners.

More generally, perceptions of the typical partner provide yet another benchmark for assessing the idealized, perhaps illusory, nature of intimates' representations. Some authors have defined *illusory perceptions* as the tendency for people to see themselves or their partners in a more positive light than they see the typical or average person (e.g., Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). By controlling for actors' perceptions of the typical partner, we indexed the virtues individuals ascribed to their own partners, above and beyond any tendency to embellish their partners' qualities through downward social comparison.

Bias or positive distortion. We hypothesized that individuals' general desire to see the best in their intimates may lead them to see their partners in more positive ways than their partners see themselves. The models we have presented so far suggest that individuals' ideals shape their perceptions of their partners' attributes. However, these models cannot address whether actors' impressions are in fact systematically more positive than their partners' self-impressions. Nor can they address whether actors generally do see their partners more positively than they see other potential partners. Finding evidence of such distortions would provide complementary evidence that intimates' perceptions are generally idealized constructions.

To explore these hypotheses, we conducted a number of repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs), treating the couple as the unit of analysis. Our within-subject variables were target (e.g., self vs. partner or partner vs. typical) and gender (male or female intimate). The results indicate that married individuals evaluated their partners (M = 6.51) even more positively than their partners evaluated themselves (M = 6.24), $F(1, 74) = 12.46$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, married individuals also rated their own partners' attributes (M = 6.51) more positively than the typical partner's attributes (M = 5.62), $F(1, 75) = 65.85$, $p < .001$.

Dating couples' perceptions were slightly more complicated. Parallel to married couples, partner evaluations (M = 6.70) were again more favorable than self-evaluations (M = 6.30), $F(1, 97) = 58.38$, $p < .001$. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Target (self vs. partner) × Gender interaction, $F(1, 97) = 28.30$, $p < .001$. Dating women were more likely to idealize their partners relative to their partners' self-perceptions (a discrepancy of 0.84), $F(1, 97) = 6.67$, $p < .01$, than were dating men (a discrepancy of −0.04), $F(1, 97) < 1$. As the means in Table 1 indicate, this finding does not seem to reflect men's lack of idealization but dating women's extremely high self-regard. Also, parallel to married couples, dating intimates saw their partners (M = 6.70) in a more favorable light than they saw the typical partner (M = 5.81), $F(1, 97) = 140.54$, $p < .001$. Finally, married and dating women's perceptions tended to be more favorable than men's independent of target: Ms = 6.20 and 6.05, $F(1, 74) = 3.52$, $p < .07$, for married women and men, respectively; Ms = 6.46 and 6.09, $F(1, 97) = 28.68$, $p < .001$, for dating women and men, respectively.[6]

Evidence for positive illusions? Taken together, our evidence

[6] Although this evidence of distortion complements the path models, it is not a necessary component of illusions within our framework. For instance, Hillary's mean rating of Bill could match Bill's mean rating of himself (i.e., no distortion). However, Hillary's perception of Bill could still be illusory if she did not see the same traits in him that he saw in himself (i.e., a lack of convergence). In other words, Hillary's tendency to project her own idiosyncratic ideals onto Bill could result in her see-

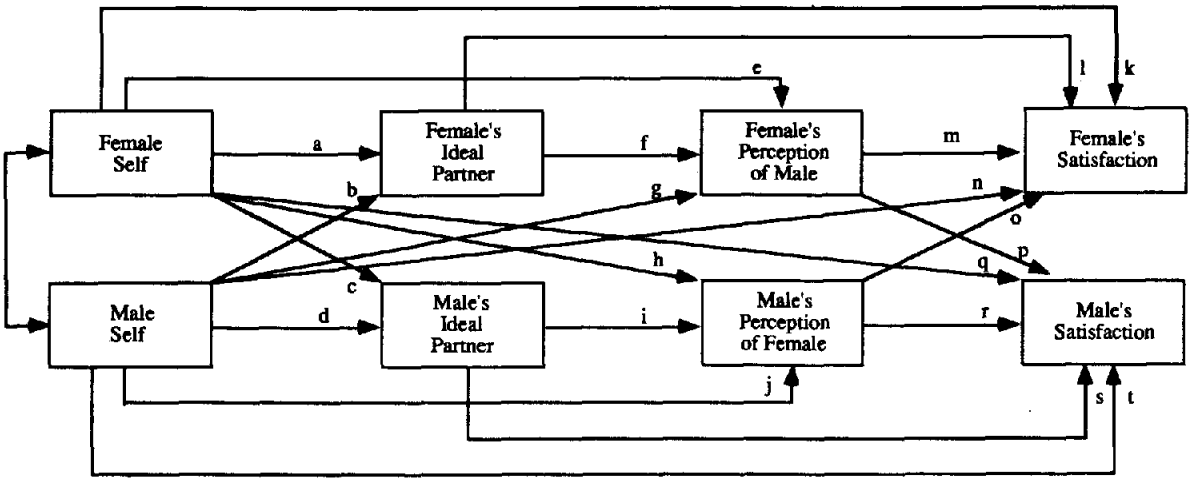

Figure 4. Projected and reflected illusions and satisfaction.

for both projection and distortion supports the notion that many intimates' representations are idealized constructions. The results suggest that many actors' impressions of their partners are more a mirror of their own positive illusions and ideals than a reflection of their partners' reported realities (see Tables 3 and 4). In fact, actors' representations are even more positive than their partners believe their attributes merit. This apparent distortion is particularly striking considering that most individuals already idealize their own attributes (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, married and dating individuals rated their own attributes far more favorably than the typical partner's attributes: married, $Ms = 6.12$ vs. 5.57, $F(1, 75) = 42.83$, $p < .001$; dating, $Ms = 6.18$ vs. 5.69, $F(1, 97) = 68.56$, $p < .001$. Thus, actors' constructions even transcended their partners' own rosy self-perceptions. In summary, individuals' representations generally appear to be "positive illusions," particularly when they are considered in light of their partners' own realities.

Seeing What One Wants to See: The Benefits of Positive Illusions

> Love is a gross exaggeration of the difference between one person and everybody else. (George Bernard Shaw)

Heeding Shaw's intuitions, we hypothesized that the realities intimates constructed would be intricately tied to feelings of satisfaction. We expected individuals to be happier in their relationships to the extent that they idealized their partners: the projected illusions hypothesis. To translate this hypothesis into path-analytic terms, actors' illusions should predict their own feelings of satisfaction, controlling for the "reality" of their partners' attributes. We also hypothesized that intimates would be happier with partners who idealized them: the reflected illusions hypothesis. In path-analytic terms, individuals should be happier when their partners see positive qualities in them that they do not see in themselves.

Figure 4 shows the theoretical model derived to test these predictions. New to this model, Paths n and q index social reality effects, tapping whether the partner's self-perceived attributes predict the actor's satisfaction. Paths k and t index whether actors' self-evaluations directly relate to their own satisfaction. The ideal Paths l and s index whether ideals directly relate to satisfaction. The projected illusion paths m and r index whether actors are happier when they idealize their partners, seeing virtues in them that their partners do not see in themselves. The reflected illusion Paths o and p index the effects of being idealized on satisfaction.

Before turning to our results, note that each path in this model reflects a partial or unique effect. For example, Path n represents the direct effect of the male's "reality" on the female's satisfaction, controlling for any degree of "reality-matching" (Path g). In other words, do the qualities that men see in themselves—but women fail to see in them—relate to women's satisfaction? The projected illusions Paths m and r tap whether actors' illusions predict their satisfaction, controlling for the reality of their partners' attributes. Paths l and s represent the direct effect of the actor's ideals on his or her satisfaction; that is, do the qualities that individuals desire—but fail to see in their partners—relate to actors' satisfaction?

As Table 5 illustrates, we found considerable support for the benefits of positive illusions.[7] Both dating and married intimates were happier in their relationships when they idealized

ing Bill in a much different light than he saw himself, even if her mean-rating of him mirrored his own. The path models capture an integral feature of illusions that is not captured by simple mean differences in perceptions: intimates' tendency to project their own wishes onto their partners, seeing them differently than their partners see themselves.

[7] All paths in Figure 4 were included in the estimation of the model (including Paths a through j). We only report the path coefficients predicting satisfaction in Table 5 because the remaining coefficients are identical to those presented in Table 4.

Table 5
Positive Illusions and Satisfaction

Predicting actor's satisfaction	Married sample		Dating sample	
	Coefficient	*t*	Coefficient	*t*
Reality paths				
k and t: Actor's self-image	.007	*ns*	−.060	*ns*
n and q: Partner's self-image	.086	*ns*	−1.66	−2.37*
Construction paths				
l and s: Actor's ideals	.230	2.89**	.012	*ns*
m and r: Actor's idealized constructions	.339	4.47***	.526	6.95***
o and p: Partner's idealized constructions	.203	2.90**	.242	3.45***

Note. $GFI_{(married)} = .95$, $\chi^2(14, N = 75) = 15.18$, *ns*. $GFI_{(dating)} = .97$, $\chi^2(14, N = 98) = 13.83$, *ns*. GFI = goodness-of-fit index.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

their partners, as the significant pooled projected illusion Paths m and r illustrate. The more positive, the more idealized their constructions—controlling for the partner's actual attributes—the happier actors were in their relationships. Being idealized also predicted greater satisfaction for both dating and married couples. That is, intimates were happier in their relationships when their partners looked beyond their actual attributes and saw the best in them, as the significant pooled reflected illusion Paths o and p illustrate. (Idealizing and being idealized also predicted greater satisfaction when we examined the virtues and faults subscales separately.)

Turning to the ideal paths, even high (but unmet) ideals predicted greater satisfaction for married men and women, as the significant pooled Paths l and s illustrate. However, the direct effect of ideals was nonsignificant for dating couples. Turning to the "reality" paths, the partner's self-perceived attributes had little impact on married couples' satisfaction. The pooled effects of the partner's own reality (Paths n and q) were nonsignificant. For dating couples, however, the pooled "reality" paths were significant and negative, suggesting that dating individuals were less happy when their partners claimed virtues in themselves that the individuals failed to see in them.

To ensure that the illusions–satisfaction relation was not attributable to Pollyannaism, we included individuals' perceptions of the typical partner as a control variable within the model. Even in this model, the projected and reflected illusion paths remained strong and significant, suggesting that the relation between illusions and satisfaction was not a global positivity effect. Similarly, the illusion–satisfaction relations persisted even when we controlled for actors' own rosy self-perceptions (Paths k and t) as well as their global self-esteem, suggesting that relationship-specific illusions are indeed critical for satisfaction.[8]

Seeing What One's Partner Sees: The Benefits of Shared Realities?

Our evidence for the importance of positive illusions contrasts with the notion that understanding a partner's "true" qualities is the key to continued satisfaction. From this perspective, actors should be happier to the extent that their impressions of their partners match their partners' self-perceptions. Similarly, individuals should be happiest when their partners see them as they see themselves, even if this involves confirming a negative self-view (e.g., Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Swann et al., 1992). To this point, we have not found any strong support for

[8] A number of the reviewers raised the possibility of using difference scores to test our hypotheses. The problem with using difference scores in correlational analyses is not primarily one of unreliability (a problem that comes with two highly correlated scores going into the difference, as in the common case of change scores), but of the confounding of the difference score effect with the two main effects that go into the difference. This problem is best illustrated symbolically. The covariance of a difference score (i.e., partner − self-perceptions) with an outcome variable (i.e., satisfaction) equals the following: cov(partner, satisfaction) − cov(self, satisfaction). There are two problems with this equation. First, differences in the variance of partner perceptions and self-perceptions can give rise to a difference score correlation with satisfaction. Second, even if the variances are equal and the equation becomes a simple function of *r*(partner, satisfaction) minus *r*(self, satisfaction), then the difference score correlation merely indicates whether satisfaction is more highly correlated with the first main effect (i.e., partner) or the second main effect (i.e., self). It reveals nothing more than that. This can be seen more intuitively by thinking about a hierarchical regression in which the two main effects are entered first and then the difference score is entered to predict satisfaction. Obviously, the difference score will be rejected as being completely collinear with the two main effects. Using difference scores can even give rise to the absurd situation in which one can collect partner ratings and then randomly generate data for self-ratings. In this case, the difference score correlation will be large and positive, reflecting only the effect of partner ratings. This, in brief, is why we have profound reservations about the use of difference score correlations. However, given the debate surrounding the use of difference scores, we detail these analyses for the interested reader. In terms of partner–self discrepancies, Hillary and Bill should be happier the more Bill's perceptions of her exceed her own self-ratings (or the less Bill devalues her relative to her own self-ratings). That is, the correlation between satisfaction and the signed partner–self discrepancy should be positive. Also, in terms of the ideal–partner discrepancies, Hillary and Bill should be happier the smaller the discrepancy between Hillary's ideals and her perception of Bill if we follow the logic proposed by Higgins (1987) or Thibaut and Kelley (1959). That is, the correlation between satisfaction and the ideal–partner discrepancy should be negative. The benefits of relationship illusions were also apparent in these discrepancy analyses. In terms of projected illusions, married men and women were happier the more positive their perceptions of their part-

Table 6
The Relation Between Self-Verification (or Understanding) and Satisfaction

	Married sample		Dating sample	
	β	t	β	t
Predicting actor's satisfaction				
Female partner's reality	.115	*ns*	−.076	*ns*
Male actor's perception	.510	5.13****	.526	5.43****
Interaction (men's understanding)	−.207	−2.25**	−.007	*ns*
Male partner's reality	.060	*ns*	−.034	*ns*
Female actor's perception	.552	5.62****	.567	6.35****
Interaction (women's understanding)	.077	*ns*	−.065	*ns*
Predicting partner's satisfaction				
Male partner's reality	.211	1.94*	.072	*ns*
Female actor's perception	.301	2.77***	.310	3.07***
Interaction (women's understanding)	.052	*ns*	−.105	*ns*
Female partner's reality	.177	1.68*	.305	2.99***
Male actor's perception	.383	3.63****	.184	1.81*
Interaction (men's understanding)	−.017	*ns*	−.274	−2.92***

*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .0001$.

the importance of such validation processes. However, the path models do not explicitly test this self-verification hypothesis.

To explore the relationship benefits of understanding, we conducted a series of regression analyses predicting satisfaction from the actor's perceptions of the partner, the partner's self-ratings, and their interaction. If self-verification promotes satisfaction, we should find a significant interaction in the regression analyses. Understanding (i.e., seeing what one's partner sees) should predict greater satisfaction, whereas misunderstandings should predict less satisfaction.[9] But if unconditional admiration is all that matters, we should find a main effect only for the actor's perceptions. Intimates should simply be happier to the extent that they see one another in a positive, idealized light.

Table 6 shows the results of the regression analyses on the interpersonal qualities scale. For married couples, projected illusions, as indexed by the significant main effects for actors' perceptions (in predicting actors' satisfaction), again predicted greater satisfaction. Men and women were both happier the more positive their images of their spouse. Unexpectedly, men's understanding of women's self-concepts also predicted men's satisfaction, as the significant interaction illustrates. Inspection of the means in a 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed that married men were the least satisfied when their impressions matched their partners' relatively negative self-views. Such understanding should predict greater satisfaction in a self-verification framework.

Parallel to our reflected illusions findings, married intimates were also happier when their partners saw the best in them, as reflected in the significant main effects for actors' perceptions (in predicting partners' satisfaction). We did not find any evidence of an interaction, suggesting that misunderstandings did not detract from partners' satisfaction. Instead, married individuals were happier to the extent that their partners saw the best in them, regardless of whether such idealized impressions were consistent with their self-perceptions.

Among dating couples, projected illusions again predicted greater satisfaction. Both men and women were happier the

ners relative to their spouses' self-perceptions, $rs(73) = .28$ and $.39$, $ps < .05$ and $.01$, respectively. This was also true for dating couples, $rs(96) = .36$ and $.39$, $ps < .01$, respectively. Also, married men and women were happier the smaller the discrepancy they perceived between their ideal and actual partners, $rs(73) = -.27$ and $-.26$, $ps < .05$, respectively. This was also true for dating couples, $rs(96) = -.37$ and $-.47$, $ps < .01$, respectively. A similar pattern of results emerged when we examined the evidence for reflected illusions, although the unreliability of difference scores resulted in weaker patterns compared with the path analyses. Married men and women were generally happier the more positive their spouses' impressions of them relative to their own self-perceptions, $rs(73) = .22$ and $.18$, $ps < .07$ and $.15$, respectively. This was also true for dating men, $r(96) = .16$, $p < .10$, although this correlation was nonsignificant for dating women. Also, married men and women were happier the smaller the discrepancy between their spouses' ideals and their impressions of them, $rs(73) = -.20$ and $-.33$, $ps < .05$ and $.01$, respectively. This was also true for dating couples, $rs(96) = -.33$ and $-.26$, $ps < .01$ and $.05$, respectively.

[9] To understand the meaning of the cross-product term, imagine that we first have centered the two independent variables, partner self-ratings and actor's perceptions, by subtracting the relevant mean from each observation. This transformation affects only the intercept term, and does not affect the analyses presented here. The meaning of the cross-product term as a measure of understanding is now clear. If both perceptions are positive (above the relevant mean), the actor "understands" the partner, yielding a positive cross product. Similarly, if both perceptions are negative (below the relevant mean), the actor also "understands" the partner, again yielding a positive cross product. However, if one perception is positive and the other is negative, then a "misunderstanding" occurs, yielding a negative cross product. Self-verification implies that understanding will lead to satisfaction and misunderstandings to dissatisfaction. Therefore, if self-verification relates to satisfaction in this manner, we should find a significant positive coefficient for the cross-product term. Of course, the crucial difference between this theory and the current model is in the case in which an actor "understands" (i.e., agrees with) a partner's negative self-perceptions.

more positive their impressions of their partners, as the significant main effects for actors' perceptions illustrate (in predicting actors' satisfaction). Actors' understanding of their partners' self-concepts (i.e., the interaction term) did not predict their happiness. Turning to reflected illusions, dating men were also happier to the extent that their partners idealized them. We again found no evidence of an interaction (in predicting partners' satisfaction): These men were simply happier if they were idealized, regardless of whether such rosy constructions validated their own self-perceptions. Unexpectedly, dating women's satisfaction was predicted by men's understanding of them, as the significant interaction illustrates. In contrast, the main effect for actors' perceptions was marginal.

To further explore this interaction, we first plotted the residualized cross-product term against dating women's level of satisfaction. On inspecting this plot, we realized that there was no general linear relation between these terms. Instead, we noticed that one respondent had an extremely low satisfaction score. This woman's satisfaction score was 6 *SD*s below the mean, raising the possibility that the interaction might simply have been due to the influence of this extremely dissatisfied person. In fact, when we removed this outlier from our analysis, the interaction disappeared.[10] Even when we included this outlier couple, the pattern of means in a 2 × 2 ANOVA still did not support self-verification: dating women were the least happy when their partners understood their own relatively negative self-perceptions.

The absence of self-verification effects in our dating sample is perhaps not surprising in light of Swann et al.'s (1994) recent evidence that dating intimates are happier when their partners flatter (or idealize) them. But married individuals are thought to resist such "groundless" flattery and insist that their partners see them as they see themselves (Swann et al., 1994). However, we did not find any evidence that being idealized detracts from satisfaction in marriage.[11]

Is there a way to resolve this discrepancy? Perhaps self-verification is more important for the more objective, highly public attributes (e.g., physically attractive, musically skilled, athletic) examined by Swann et al. (1994). Illusions, by contrast, may reap their greatest benefits when the criteria for possession of a particular attribute are more ambiguous, as may be the case with the more abstract, interpersonal qualities we examined (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991). For instance, it is easy to imagine that Hillary would get little satisfaction from Bill's praise of her athletic skills if countless accidents in high school gym classes already had her convinced of her inherent clumsiness. His apparent lack of discernment might even detract from the value of his reflected appraisals. But she might be comforted by Bill's praise of her warmth, particularly if she worried that her shyness made her appear cold.

However, we still found no evidence for self-verification in marriage even when we examined the most concrete, public attributes included in our scales (e.g., intelligent, sociable, witty). Instead, our results consistently suggest that a certain degree of idealization or illusion characterizes satisfying dating and even marital relationships.[12]

A Final Test Between Illusions and Understanding: Trait-Specific Agreement

The level of agreement between an individual's overall impression of his or her partner and that partner's overall self-perception is not the only possible index of accurate or "reality-based" perceptions. We also can look within our trait measure and index accuracy by the correlation between an individual's rating of his or her partner on each trait and that partner's self-rating on each trait. That is, the within-couple correlation across the different traits provides a measure of accuracy or agreement that is independent of overall positivity but captures whether intimates agree in terms of their relative ratings of specific traits. A strong within-couple correlation does not imply that actors and partners agree on their actual trait ratings, only that they rank the traits similarly in terms of their relative descriptiveness.

Such trait-specific agreement may promote satisfaction, as the self-verification model predicts. For example, Kobak and Hazan (1991) found that satisfied intimates held more accurate or convergent perceptions of their spouses' working models of attachment. To index accuracy (in terms of the relative ordering of attachment items), Kobak and Hazan computed the intra-couple correlations between an individual's ratings of his or her partner on a variety of attachment dimensions and the partner's self-ratings. This procedure yields two correlations per relationship: that between the wife's perceptions of her husband and his self-perceptions and between the husband's perceptions of his wife and her self-perceptions.

Using the same logic, we calculated a set of within-couple correlations on our interpersonal traits scale. Examining these correlations allowed us to assess, for example, whether intimates were happier in their relationships if they perceived themselves to be more warm than demanding and their spouses shared this perception. For the level of convergence, the correlations indexing women's validation of men's self-perceptions ranged from −.30 to .89 (M = .40, SD = .25) for the married sample and from −.36 to .70 (M = .20, SD = .27) for the dating sample. Similarly, the correlations indexing men's validation of women's self-perceptions ranged from −.42 to .85 (M = .41, SD = .25) for the married sample and from −.18 to .82 (M = .39, SD = .24) for the dating sample. We then correlated these validation indexes with satisfaction. Such trait-specific agreement had no significant bearing on satisfaction in either sample.

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[10] We conducted all of our analyses for the dating sample with this couple excluded. Doing so did not change any of the results we have already presented.

[11] To further explore the self-verification hypothesis, we examined the correlations between partner's satisfaction and actor's appraisal separately for partners scoring low, medium, or high on Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale. For both married and dating samples, these correlations were always positive and almost always significant, again suggesting that individuals were happier when they were idealized, not when they were more accurately understood.

[12] A subset of our dating couples (n = 56) completed Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde's (1992) actual Personal Attributes Questionnaire. When we examined intimates' self- and partner depictions on these "objective" qualities, we still found strong support for our positive illusions model. Dating intimates projected their own virtues on these traits onto their partners. In addition, the resulting positive illusions predicted greater satisfaction for both themselves and their partners. This suggests that the idealization–satisfaction relation is not limited to the abstract, interpersonal qualities we examined, a point we return to in the General Discussion section.

Men's validation of women's self-perceptions did not significantly predict their own satisfaction in either married ($r[73] = -.12$) or dating ($r[96] = .01$) samples or their partners' satisfaction in either married ($r[73] = .07$) or dating ($r[96] = .02$) samples. Similarly, women's validation of men's self-perceptions did not predict their own satisfaction in either married ($r[73] = .11$) or dating ($r[96] = -.10$) samples or their partners' satisfaction in either married ($r[73] = -.02$) or dating ($r[96] = -.10$) samples.[13]

On the other hand, trait-specific illusions may predict satisfaction in the same way that idealizing the global nature of a partner's attributes predicts greater satisfaction. In investigating this hypothesis, we first calculated two idealization correlations per couple: that between the man's ideal for each trait and his perception of his partner on that trait and that between the woman's ideal and her perception of her partner. These correlations index the degree to which intimates' ideals structure their perceptions of the relative descriptiveness of their partners' traits, although they are independent of the overall positivity of these ratings. The idealization indexes for women ranged from correlations of $-.15$ to .92 ($M = .54$, $SD = .26$) for the married sample and from $-.13$ to .94 ($M = .52$, $SD = .24$) for the dating sample. Similarly, the correlations between men's impressions and their ideals ranged from $-.43$ to 1.00 for the married sample ($M = .39$, $SD = .31$) and from $-.30$ to .96 ($M = .48$, $SD = .26$) for the dating sample.

To index the benefits of projected and reflected illusions, we correlated the idealization indexes with satisfaction, partialing out the within-couple correlation between the actor's perceptions of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions. The resulting correlations thus represented the pure illusion correlation: that between ideals and perceptions, holding the actor's accurate understanding of the partner's self-ratings constant. For projected illusions, dating men, $r(96) = .35$, $p < .001$, and dating women, $r(96) = .40$, $p < .001$, were happier in their relationships the greater the convergence they perceived between their ideal prototypes and their constructions of their partners. Similarly, married men were happier the greater the convergence they perceived between their ideals and their impressions, $r(73) = .33$, $p < .01$. This correlation was not significant for married women.

Turning to reflected illusions, dating men were happier in their relationships if their partners idealized their status on specific attributes, $r(96) = .26$, $p < .01$. However, this correlation was not significant for dating women. Similarly, married women were also more satisfied the more their partners idealized their status on specific attributes, $r(73) = .31$, $p < .01$. This correlation was not significant for married men. In most cases, examining idealized perceptions at a trait-specific level yielded evidence consistent with the analyses on overall perceptions: Intimates were generally happier when they saw one another in idealized ways.

General Discussion

Happiness depends, as Nature shows,
Less on exterior things than most suppose. (William Cowper)

The Construction of Satisfaction: A Summary

Intimates' impressions of their partners appeared to reflect a mixture of "reality" and "illusion" (see Figure 1). Actors' impressions converged moderately with their partners' self-perceptions, suggesting that some degree of mutual understanding characterizes most close relationships. Individuals who thought highly of themselves also were held in high regard by their partners. Similarly, the within-couple correlations revealed that the attributes partners believed were most self-descriptive were also seen as defining traits by actors. Surprisingly, mutual understanding was not any more evident among married than dating couples.

Intimates also appeared to take considerable license in constructing impressions of their partners. Constructed representations—what intimates saw in their partners that their partners did not see in themselves—appeared to reflect their tendency to see their partners as they wished to see them, through the filters provided by their ideals and rosy self-images. Higher ideals and more positive self-perceptions predicted more idealized impressions. Actors' models of the ideal partner also appeared to structure their impressions of specific attributes, as the within-person correlations between ideals and perceptions illustrate.

As a further testament to the idealized nature of intimates' constructions, both married and dating individuals generally saw their partners even more positively than their partners saw themselves. (The only exception was that dating men did not exceed their partners' self-ratings in their depictions, perhaps because dating women's self-views were already exceptionally positive.) Intimates' depictions of the typical partner also accentuated their own partners' many unique virtues. Intriguingly, married individuals appeared to be just as susceptible to the lure of seeing what they wanted to see in their partners, despite the common belief that idealization is a malady largely confined to dating (e.g., Brehm, 1992).

Such positive illusions were most likely to characterize satisfying dating and even marital relationships. As the projected illusions findings illustrate, intimates were happier in their relationships when they saw virtues in their partners that their partners did not see in themselves. The more idealized the construction, the greater the satisfaction. Being the target of such idealized constructions also predicted greater satisfaction, as the reflected illusions findings illustrate. Intimates were happier in their relationships when their partners looked beyond the reality of their self-perceived attributes and saw the best in them.

Is Idealization an Illusion?

The central challenge in understanding the role of "illusions" in romantic relationships is identifying appropriate benchmarks or baselines for "reality." After all, distinguishing fact from fiction requires some knowledge of reality. However, in the interpersonal domain few gold standards exist for measuring objective truths. We turned to subjective realities—in-

[13] We transformed the reported intracouple correlations using Fisher's (1921) recommended procedure and then correlated these indexes with satisfaction. Transforming the correlations did not change any of the reported results.

dividuals' own personal views of their virtues and faults—as a proxy for truth.

Actors' impressions did appear "illusory" in light of their partners' realities. Individuals generally saw virtues in their partners that their partners claimed not to see in themselves. But can this definition of "reality" be trusted? Perhaps individuals are actually being overly humble in their self-depictions, describing themselves less virtuously than they actually believe themselves to be. Using such modest (and insincere) self-depictions as "reality" baselines would then overestimate the evidence for illusions and their benefits. That is, the apparent benefits of illusions might actually represent the benefits of having a humble, self-effacing partner.

However, several points argue against this humility account of illusions. First, considerable evidence suggests that biases in self-report lean toward self-aggrandizement rather than self-effacement (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). As an illustration of this bias, both married and dating respondents depicted themselves much more favorably than they depicted the typical partner. Individuals also tended to see their own attributes as ideal, again suggesting that their self-depictions were less than humble. Finally, intimates were generally happier when their partners held themselves in high regard, as the zero-order correlations illustrate (see Table 2).

Perhaps individuals' perceptions of their partners only appear illusory because actors and partners rely on different contexts and experiences as the bases for their impressions. For example, in judging his warmth, Bill might consider how warmly he acts toward Hillary, how warmly he acts toward his coworkers, and how warmly he acts toward his friends. In judging Bill's warmth, Hillary might only consider how warmly he acts toward her. Using Bill's (cross-situational) self-concept as a "reality" baseline for assessing the constructed nature of Hillary's (situation-specific) impressions might then overestimate the evidence for illusions.

However, actors' perceptions appeared equally "illusory" whether partners' realities were based on traits such as intelligence, attractiveness, and athleticism (traits that should be consistent from context to context) or more person-specific traits such as warmth, tolerance, and responsiveness. Also, individuals depicted themselves in the context of completing a questionnaire about their relationships. Therefore, when Bill rated his warmth, his behavior toward Hillary should have been utmost in his mind. Finally, greater familiarity did not weaken the evidence for illusions among married couples, despite the greater opportunity for them to observe their partners across many contexts. In light of these arguments, actors' illusions do not simply appear to be "cognitive errors" in judgment (resulting from actors' and partners' reliance on different contexts for judgment).

Despite its imperfect nature, the convergence between the actor's impression of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions may provide one of the best available proxies for reality. For example, Funder (1987) argued that interjudge agreement is the best, perhaps the only, definition of accuracy or truth. In indexing actors' illusions, we followed this same line of logic, partialing "truth" (i.e., shared judgments) out of actors' perceptions. Using an alternative "reality" baseline—perceptions of the typical partner—also told a highly similar story. Intimates' images of their partners appeared just as illusory or idealized in light of their much less charitable depictions of the typical partner (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Self-deception or other-deception? Satisfied intimates in our research seemed to be deceiving themselves, projecting their images of the ideal partner onto their own partners. However, is it possible that satisfied intimates are actually trying to deceive a more public audience (i.e., the investigator), despite their anonymous reports? That is, can a general social desirability bias account for the current findings?

According to this account, the illusion–satisfaction relation might be a simple artifact of certain people's tendencies to depict themselves and their relationships in a desirable light. Such a bias might stem from intentional distortions or habitual tendencies to use high (vs. low) points on a scale. However, ratings of the typical partner likely captured such habitual tendencies to respond to scaled items in particular ways. And when we controlled for intimates' perceptions of the typical partner, projected and reflected illusions still predicted greater satisfaction. But do impressions of the typical partner provide an adequate control for more intentional distortions?

For instance, intimates might actually maintain idealized impressions by derogating the typical partner (e.g., Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). But this did not appear to be the case in the current study because more positive self- and partner ratings generally predicted more positive impressions of the typical partner (see Table 2). Maybe derogation effects are more likely to be observed in paradigms, such as in the studies just cited, where some threat to satisfaction is posed (e.g., a tempting alternative partner). Alternatively, any motivated tendencies toward socially desirable responding might be specific to self- and relationship depictions (and not surface in intimates' ratings of the typical partner). Reports of self-esteem, however, capture individuals' tendency to depict themselves in a socially desirable light. And when we controlled for self-esteem, projected and reflected illusions still predicted greater satisfaction.

Also, the evidence for the interpersonal benefits of illusions argues against a social desirability account of the illusions–satisfaction relation. A skeptic would have to argue that people pair or match on social desirability to explain why intimates are happier when their partners idealize them. Finally, the benefits of idealization were apparent on more "behavioral" criteria even when we controlled for intimates' tendency to present their relationships in a favorable light, as indexed by reports of satisfaction. That is, idealizing a partner (projected illusions) and being idealized (reflected illusions) predicted relatively less conflict in both samples, even when we controlled for relationship satisfaction, an extremely conservative analysis.[14]

Taken together, the arguments just presented suggest that the illusion–satisfaction relation is not a simple artifact of certain people's attempts to deceive an external audience. Instead, a certain degree of self-deception appears to be an integral feature of satisfying romantic relationships.

What is the "real" causal model? Lest the reader accuse us

[14] Reports of conflict were assessed with Braiker and Kelley's (1979) conflict negativity index.

of deceiving ourselves, however, we must emphasize again that our cross-sectional data cannot test the causal assumptions underlying our models. For instance, although we have characterized illusions as leading to satisfaction, the relation between illusions and satisfaction is more likely reciprocal in nature. Satisfaction may promote idealization as well as result from it. Similarly, intimates' ideals might stem from their perceptions of their partners' attributes as well as guiding these perceptions. So-called "causal models" cannot distinguish between these causal alternatives.[15]

However, we can argue logically against certain alternatives. For instance, because individuals' ideals were not related to their partners' actual qualities but their impressions of their partners were related to this "reality," it does seem plausible that ideals shape perceptions (as well, perhaps, as stemming from them). A more serious threat to our interpretation of the results is that self-images, ideals, and perceptions of a partner are related only through a shared, perhaps spurious, correlation with satisfaction. If this were the case, the evidence for projection (and idealization) should disappear if satisfaction were placed first in the model (as an exogenous variable). However, when we estimated this model for both dating and married samples, we still found considerable evidence for projection, suggesting that idealization is not simply a result of satisfaction or a process that is fully reflected in satisfaction at any one point in time. Ultimately, though, disentangling the "true" causal model underlying the illusions–satisfaction relation requires further experimental and longitudinal research.

Maintaining Idealism: Models of Self and Other

Do individuals love from strength or weakness? Freud (1922) argued that individuals project the qualities they wish to see in themselves onto their partners (e.g., Karp et al., 1970). Idealizing a partner essentially depends on dissatisfaction with oneself. For instance, Dion and Dion (1975) found that individuals with low self-esteem admired their partners more than individuals with high self-esteem. Also, individuals with more negative self-models, such as intimates with a preoccupied attachment style, appear most likely to idealize their partners (Feeney & Noller, 1991). Similarly, Mathes and Moore (1985) argued that individuals with low self-esteem seek to fulfill their ideal selves by falling in love with someone they think has the qualities they lack.

The opposite argument is that idealization and satisfying relationships depend on positive models of self (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Rogers, 1972). For instance, individuals with higher self-esteem tend to be involved in more stable relationships (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). In the current research, self-perceptions were closely tied to ideals and impressions of one's partner, suggesting that self-models play a role in structuring models of others. Individuals with more positive self-images had higher ideals, and more positive perceptions of their partners. Conversely, individuals with more negative self-perceptions had weaker hopes for ideal partners and were less generous in their depictions of their actual partners. Such interrelations among models of self and other are not surprising in light of symbolic interactionist and attachment theorists' arguments that perceptions of the self as worthy of love are strongly tied to positive beliefs about the availability of others and their dispositions in relationship contexts (see Baldwin, 1992).

Intriguingly, intimates' hopes for the ideal partner appeared to have a stronger influence on their perceptions than more general working models of typical partners. Within an attachment theory framework, such generalized expectancies about others are thought to be rooted in individuals' early experiences with attachment figures and structure their later construals of their adult close relationships (e.g., Kobak & Hazan, 1991). However, consistent with our findings, adult children of divorce appear to have pessimistic expectations about others in general and the institution of marriage (i.e., general working models), but they are still hopeful and optimistic about the possibilities for their own romantic relationships (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). If individuals are motivated to maintain confidence in the face of the risks of interdependence, ideals may function as a more satisfying guide for perceptions than general expectations. After all, seeing a partner as nearly ideal should leave a person feeling much more secure than believing this person is susceptible to the many faults afflicting most others.

Our emphasis on the benefits of high ideals contrasts with the notion that ideals function largely as rigorous standards (or comparison levels) that a partner can only fail to meet (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Rather than dampening satisfaction, higher ideals actually predicted greater satisfaction in both samples. Although this reasoning is speculative, ideals may have this filtering effect because people possess considerable poetic license in constructing impressions of the partners they most want to see (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994). Individuals may see their ideals in their partners by constructing idiosyncratic definitions that depict their partners' behaviors as evidence of desired qualities (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989).

The meaning of attributes and specific behaviors themselves also may be open to the whims of construal (e.g., Gergen et al., 1986; Griffin & Ross, 1991). Satisfied intimates, for example, typically explain away their partners' faults by attributing negative behaviors to specific, unstable features of the situation (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1976; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Also, individuals fashion portraits of the typical partner in a way that emphasizes their partners' virtues and minimizes their faults (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Given this flexibility in construal, individuals with positive self- and ideal models may have little difficulty seeing their partners in the most flattering, idealistic light.

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[15] Comparing the fit of alternative models will not help us disentangle the "real" relations among the variables in our model. Imagine that we placed partner perceptions before ideals in Figure 4. Because this revised model contains all the paths in the original model, both models will fit the data equally well. This would be true regardless of how we structured the interrelation among the variables, as long as both models include paths among the same sets of variables. Only the betas may differ from model to model. Comparative tests of model fit can only be done hierarchically by comparing the fit of models that set particular paths to be equal with the fit of models that allow the paths to vary or by comparing the fit of models that omit a path to the fit of models that include this path.

Is Love Blind? Positive Illusions and Relationship Well-Being

The current findings follow on the heels of the large literature arguing that optimism or idealism is critical for mental health (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980). From this perspective, happiness rests on people's ability to see a sometimes stern reality in the best possible light (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Collins, Skokan, & Aspinwall, 1989). For example, individuals typically underestimate their faults while embellishing their virtues (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986). Individuals are similarly idealistic in predicting their futures, overestimating the likelihood of desirable events while underestimating the likelihood of negative events (Weinstein, 1980). People also choose objects of social comparison in a way that serves to accentuate their own virtues while minimizing their faults (e.g., Wood, 1989). Rather than being accurately attuned with the harsher realities of life, happy individuals tend to see their worlds in ways that support their optimism and idealism.

Similarly, satisfied intimates see their partners in ways that support their hopes and fantasies, embellishing their partners' virtues and obscuring their faults. Idealization may have this beneficial effect because ideals provide a template for constructing a sense of conviction that resolves the tension between one's commitments and doubts (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994). From an attachment perspective, seeing one's partner as (nearly) ideal may foster a sense of internal peace that dampens doubts and secures satisfaction through the comfort derived from the thought of possessing a caregiver who mirrors one's hopes. Also, idealizing a partner may be self-affirming (or self-fulfilling) if intimates draw their partners into their own self-images (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Tesser, 1988). Our findings also complement research on social comparison processes suggesting that individuals construct impressions of alternative partners in ways that serve to sustain their own satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Buunk et al., 1990; Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). For example, satisfied, committed intimates believe their relationships are more equitable than others (Buunk & VanYperen, 1991) and far more virtuous (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Conversely, idealized intimates may be happier in their relationships because their partners treat them as special individuals, thereby encouraging intimates to live up to these idealized images (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Also, if actors see their partners' behaviors through the rosy filters provided by their ideals, their inclination toward "attributional charity" might minimize the potential for overt conflict (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Finally, positive reflected appraisals might eventually undermine partners' self-criticisms, thereby bolstering their sense of self-worth. In these ways, unconditional admiration may provide the foundation for relationship satisfaction and intimacy, as well as assuring intimates that their partners truly care for them (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Idealism versus understanding. Unconditional positive regard—seeing the best in partners despite their imperfections—appears to be an integral part of satisfying romantic relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988). In contrast to this perspective, one might have expected actual understanding (i.e., self-verification) to predict greater satisfaction precisely because intimates would then know and understand one another's actual virtues and faults and still accept and love one another (Swann et al., 1994). After all, it might be disconcerting for individuals to believe that their partners are only in love with an "illusion." Despite these arguments, individuals were not more satisfied when their partners' perceptions of them mirrored their own self-images.

In the critical case of individuals who have relatively low self-regard, intimates still were more satisfied if their partners saw the best in them despite their own self-doubts. Also, even in marriage, being idealized predicted greater satisfaction regardless of whether we focused on abstract interpersonal qualities or more objective qualities, such as those used by Swann et al. (1992, 1994).

Perhaps any relationship benefits of self-verification are limited to situations in which the traits in dispute are central to the partner's self-concept and subject to ready verification by external observers. In such cases, individuals who fail to see such obvious weaknesses might be perceived as defensively denying an unpleasant "reality" that the partner has been struggling to accept. Consistent with this logic, Levinger and Breedlove (1966) argued that accuracy may be more important for instrumental, observable attributes than for affectional attributes. Alternatively, the benefits of self-verification may become apparent only over the longer term.

Hidden Realities: A Sleeper Effect?

Is idealization the key to enduring satisfaction? Or might intimates' illusions only leave them vulnerable to disappointment once the rigors of greater interdependence make the reality of their partners' virtues and faults impossible to ignore? When illusions do fade, does understanding the partner's real attributes then prove to be the key to lasting happiness?

If illusions rest on intimates' simple denial of disappointing realities, such idealism may well forecast future difficulties. For example, individuals typically ignore apparent negativity and make decisions to marry largely on the basis of their positive feelings about their partners. In fact, apparent negativity, such as premarital conflict, is virtually independent of feelings of love and satisfaction at the point of marriage (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985; Markman, 1979). However, such blatant compartmentalization in the service of idealization is not without its costs: Conflict and negativity prior to marriage, although initially divorced from satisfaction, predict later declines in satisfaction (Kelly et al., 1985; Markman, 1981).

Similarly, early on in relationships, intimates are often unaware of incompatibilities on dimensions critical for satisfaction, such as desires for intimacy and autonomy (Christensen & Heavey, 1993). Viewing their partners through the filter of their ideals, individuals may simply assume compatibility on these dimensions even when latent conflicts exist. However, such hidden realities may have an insidious effect on intimates over time, eventually eroding their illusions and dampening satisfaction. In contrast, understanding such differ-

ences in personalities or desires early on might preempt later relationship difficulties by facilitating mutual adjustment.

But if intimates simply interpret somewhat disappointing realities in the best possible light, without denying negativity, such positive illusions may ensure later satisfaction (e.g., Taylor et al., 1989). Seeing their partners' faults in the best possible light may provide intimates with the security and optimism necessary to confront difficulties in their relationships. In addition to providing constructive motivation, illusions may create resources of goodwill and generosity that prevent everyday hassles from turning into significant trivia (Holmes & Murray, in press). Intimates might even create elements of the idealized reality they perceive by treating their partners as special, unique individuals (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978; Snyder et al., 1977). In these ways, idealizing a partner may provide an effective buffer against the inevitable vicissitudes of time.

The cross-sectional nature of our results limits our ability to address these and other important issues. Longitudinal studies provide a powerful forum for studying the benefits of positive illusions, and we are currently following a sample of dating couples to explore the causal relations among illusions, negativity, and satisfaction. The ultimate utility of intimates' illusions, whether they provide the basis for continued satisfaction or eventual disillusionment, remains a question for future research.

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Received September 22, 1993
Revision received December 2, 1994
Accepted May 9, 1995 ■