

The effects of positive illusions on relationship quality



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A general presumption in the study of interpersonal relationships is that closeness is a significant, desired, and necessary characteristic of relationship satisfaction (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). According to Berscheid et al. (1989) partners' physical proximity is a requirement for closeness and relationship satisfaction. However there is mixed evidence regarding reported levels of satisfaction in relationships where partners are physically separate (i. e. long distance romantic relationships, LDRRs). Because partners in LDRRs presumably have less face-to-face (FtF) interaction than partners in close proximal romantic relationships (CPRRs), the literature infers that partners in LDRRs should report lower levels of satisfaction than partners in CPRRs. Indeed, some research suggests that partners in LDRRs report lower levels of satisfaction than partners in CPRRs (Van Horn, Arnone, Nesbitt, Desilets, Sears, Giffin, & Brudi, 1997). Counterintuitively, Guldner and Swenson (1995) found no differences in levels of satisfaction, intimacy and trust between LDRRs and CPRRs. Limited amounts of research addresses these divergent findings with regards to relationship quality measures (i. e. satisfaction, optimism, intimacy) in LDRRs and CPRRs. The present research suggests that positive illusions, defined broadly as motivated cognitive construal processes, help to elucidate these conflicting findings. Recent research shows that positive illusions are more apparent in LDRRs than in CPRRs (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Because Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996a) propose that positive illusions decrease relational uncertainty, the present study suggests that partners in LDRRs use positive illusions more than partners in CPRRs because their lack of FtF interaction heightens relationship uncertainty.

Positive Illusions

According to Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996b pp), positive illusions are “qualities that people see in their partners that their partners do not see in themselves”. They are the result of motivated cognitive processes whereby people exaggerate the qualities and traits of their partner and understate their weaknesses in the face of relationship doubt and uncertainty (Murray et al. 1996a). Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996a) argue that people develop positive illusions of their romantic partners organically through the development of their relationship. They claim that developing romantic relationships are replete with uncertainty. In the beginning of a relationship, people are learning to understand and predict their partners’ behavior. In order to maintain security in and certainty of the relationship, people adjust their cognitions about their partner, focusing on their virtues. Building on past literature regarding self-fulfilling effects of perceptions, they argue that by focusing on the positive aspects of their partner, people will tend to have positive interactions with their partner that contribute to a favorable view of their partner as the “right person” (e. g. Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977).

As relationships develop, partners become more interdependent and their investments increase (e. g., Levinger, 1983). Furthermore, over time, partners become more aware of each other’s inherent shortcomings threatening their beliefs and idealizations that their partner is the “right person”. According to Murray and colleagues (1996a), as these realities grow more apparent, people become motivated to maintain confidence in their relationship and their partner provoking the idealization process.

Research has shown that positive illusions have self-fulfilling effects. Specifically, intimates who idealize their partner experience greater decreases in relationship doubt and relationship conflict as well as greater increases in relationship satisfaction than intimates who do not idealize their partners (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). Murray and Holmes (1997) found that partners in both dating and married relationships who idealized each other experienced greater love, greater trust and less ambivalence in their relationships than those intimates who did not idealize each other. In a longitudinal follow-up study the authors found that among dating couples, those people that held stronger illusions about their partner (i. e. more idealistic perceptions of their partner) initially were less likely to terminate the relationship than those individuals who held less idealistic illusions about their partners.

Given that positive illusions fend off relational uncertainty (Murray et al., 1996a), the present research will examine whether associations between relational uncertainty and positive illusions are moderated by relationship type (i. e. LDRRs vs. CPRRs). Specifically, this study will address whether relationships marked by greater uncertainty (i. e. LDRRs) are likely to engender the use of positive illusions.

Recent research suggests that couples in LDRRs are more likely to use positive illusions than couples in CPRRs (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). They suggest a possible reason for this phenomenon. Idealizations stem from a lack of FtF interaction, a hallmark of LDRRs. Indeed they found that idealizations in LDRRs were a) more apparent than in CPRRs, b) related to a lack of FtF communication, and c) related to increased optimism about the <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-positive-illusions-on-relationship-quality/>

future of the relationship. Although initial evidence supports the idea that positive illusions are used as a way to cope with the lack of FtF interaction in LDRRs, there are a number of limitations that need to be addressed (small sample size, possibility of other mediated channels of communication).

Future research should address these limitations and offer alternative explanations for why positive illusions are more apparent in LDRRs than in CPRRs. This is because the divergences between the two relationship types are presumably not limited to quantity of FtF interaction, but having substantive qualitative differences

Because Murray, et al. (1996a) suggests that positive illusions decrease relational uncertainty, the present study suggests that partners in LDRRs use positive illusions more than partners in CPRRs because they face greater relational uncertainty. Supporting this idea, Sahlstein (2004) interviewed partners in LDRRs and found that approximately 12% of couples interviewed reported that “time apart creates uncertainty and unknowns because partners are not sharing experiences”. In addition, Sahlstein (1996) found that partners in LDRRs and CPRRs who were more certain of interaction rituals (i. e., interaction that occurs in a fixed manner at a fixed time) were more likely to report higher relationship satisfaction than partners who were not certain of interaction rituals.

Relational Uncertainty

According to Knobloch and Solomon (2002b), romantic relationships are prime contexts for experiencing uncertainty. Relational uncertainty is the “degree of confidence that people have in their perceptions of involvement

within interpersonal associations” (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). There are three main sources of relational uncertainty that arise in romantic relationships: self uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001). Self uncertainty includes partner’s reservations about their own involvement in the romantic relationship. Partner uncertainty involves people’s doubts about their partner’s participation in the relationship. Relationship uncertainty constitutes doubts about the relationship itself.

During relationship development, people are learning to navigate, understand, and predict their partners’ behavior. People experience uncertainty about their own and their partners’ goals, beliefs, emotional states, etc. (Berger, 1995). Because relational uncertainty is a negative aversive state, partners are motivated to reduce this feeling, especially if they want to remain committed to their partner and their relationship. Prior research has found that relational uncertainty is positively related to negative relationship outcomes such as jealousy (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001) and negatively related to positive relationship outcomes such as intimacy (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002; Thesis & Solomon, 2008). Because LDRRs are characterized by relational uncertainty (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Shalstein, 2004) and experienced uncertainty is linked to negative relational outcomes (decreases in intimacy, increase in jealousy), the present study will investigate the moderating effects of relationship type (LDRR or CPRR) on the relationship between relational uncertainty and positive illusions, as well as relationship quality measures (i. e., satisfaction, intimacy, optimism).

Outline of proposed study and hypotheses

The present study contributes to the growing literature on LDRRs by investigating a mediation model of relationship satisfaction moderated by relationship type (LDRR or CPRR) in order to explain how and why partners in LDRRs differ from partners in CPRRs in reports of relationship quality measures (i. e. satisfaction, intimacy, optimism). Within such parameters, this work focuses on positive illusions as a possible mediator of the relationship between relational uncertainty and relationship quality (i. e. satisfaction, closeness and optimism). In addition, the current study suggests that relationship type (LDRRs or CPRRs) will moderate the relationship between relational uncertainty and positive illusions (mediator variable) such that relational uncertainty will be associated with greater positive illusions for partner in LDRRs than partners in CPRRs. This study is a 2 (relationship type: LDRR vs. CPRR) x 2 (relational certainty: low vs. high) x 2 (positive illusions: low vs. high) between groups factorial design. The dependent measures are relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and optimism.

Hypotheses

Prior research indicates that relational uncertainty is associated with jealousy (Knobloch et al, 2001), negative emotion (Aune et al., 1994), and decreased liking for a romantic partner (Kellerman & Reynolds). Additionally, research suggests that uncertainty reduction fosters feelings of intimacy (Knobloch & Solomon; Theiss & Solomon, 2008). In line with this research, the present study proposes:

H1: People who are uncertain about their relationship will report lower levels of satisfaction and intimacy in their relationship than people who are certain about their relationship.

Murray et al (1996a) argue that positive illusions develop naturally through relationship progression. According to them, partners' idealize their partners – exaggerating their qualities and understating their weaknesses – in the face of relational uncertainty. In addition, Stafford and Merolla (2007) suggest that lack of FtF interaction leads partners in LDRRs to idealize their partners more than partners in CPRRs. They also found that positive illusions in LDRRs were related to feelings of optimism about the future of their relationship. These findings, taken together, suggest that positive illusions act as a coping mechanism for partners who face relational uncertainty.

Formally stated:

H2: People who are uncertain about their relationship will idealize their partners more than those people who are certain about their relationship.

H3: People who idealize their partner will be more satisfied with and optimistic about their relationship than people who do not idealize their partner.

H4: People who are in LDRRs will be more likely to idealize their partner than people who are in CPRRs.

Even though some research suggests otherwise (Van Horn, Arnone, Nesbitt, Desilets, Sears, Giffin, & Brudi, 1997; Helgeson, 1994a), partners in LDRRs have been found to report similar levels of satisfaction, trust, and intimacy

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as partners in CPRRs (Guldner & Swenson, 1995). Counterintuitively, these divergent findings suggest that partners in LDRRs and CPRRs do not significantly differ on their reports of satisfaction. Formally stated:

H5: People who are in LDRRs will report similar levels of relationship satisfaction as people in CPRRs.

Proposed Study

Two hundred (25 people per cell) partners who are currently in a LDRR or a CPRR will be asked to participate in the present study (the interest in this study is with individual responses not that of the dyad). Participants will be asked to fill out an informed consent form. Then a questionnaire will be given to each participant. This questionnaire will include a question about relationship status, as well as measures of relational uncertainty, positive illusions, satisfaction, intimacy, and optimism. In addition, participants will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire (age, length of relationship, attachment style, etc.)

Results

Overview of Analytic Strategy

Given that couples – in contrast to individuals – served as participants, partners' responses will likely be interdependent. Advised by Kenney (1988), couples will serve as the unit of analysis.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that people who are certain about their relationship will report lower levels of satisfaction and intimacy than people who are uncertain about their relationships. A MANOVA will be conducted with sex as

the within-dyad factor and relational certainty (low or high) as the between subjects factor. Hypothesis 2 predicts that uncertain people will idealize their partners more than those people who are certain. A MANOVA will be conducted with sex as the within-dyad factor and relational certainty as the between subjects factor. Hypothesis 3 predicts that people who idealize their partner more will be more satisfied than people who do not idealize their partner. A MANOVA will be conducted with sex as the within-dyad factor and positive illusions (high or low) as the between subjects factor. Hypotheses 4 and 5 predict that people in LDRRs will idealize their partner more than people in CPRRS but that both partners in LDRRs and in CPRRs will report similar levels of satisfaction. A MANOVA will be conducted with sex as the within-dyad factor and relationship type (LDRR or CPRR) as the between subjects factor.

Discussion

The purpose of the current research is to add to the burgeoning literature on LDRRs. Specifically, the goal is to show that positive illusions mediate the relationship between relational uncertainty and relationship quality measures. In addition, the present study suggests that relationship type moderates the relationship between relational uncertainty and positive illusions. If the proposed hypotheses are supported, there will be implications for future research focused on positive illusions and LDRRs. Specifically, the results of this study could be applied to a therapeutic setting. If positive illusions are found to be related to positive relationship outcomes then therapists could teach couples to use this coping technique as a way to deal with the stress of maintaining a LDRR.

One limitation of the proposed study is that the variables of interest are measured not manipulated. If the present results are supported, future research should attempt to manipulate relational uncertainty to determine if there is a causal relationship between uncertainty, positive illusions, and relationship quality measures. Although to date there are no relational uncertainty manipulations, future research should modify the self uncertainty priming procedure discussed in Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, and MoYtt (2007) for this purpose. In addition to conducting experiments, future research should also study other possible moderators of the proposed model. For example, attachment style as a moderator, “do insecurely attached partners feel even more uncertain in LDRR than securely attached partners?” If so, would they be even more or less likely to use positive illusions”. Future research should address these intriguing questions.

The present study also brings up a number of conceptual issues and questions. For example, although positive illusions counteract doubts people hold about the realities of their partner’s imperfections and relationship problems, are there some more severe relationship problems that should not be construed and instead be directly addressed? Recent research suggests that these cognitive construal processes are maladaptive for partners who face more severe or frequent relationship problems (McNulty, O’Mara & Karney, 2008). In a longitudinal study, McNulty et al. (2008) found that although positive illusions led to greater marital satisfaction in healthy marriages (i. e., less relationship problems and observed negative behavior), these cognitive processes also led to a decrease in marital satisfaction for those partners in troubled marriages. The authors suggest that partners who

face mild marital problems may benefit from using positive illusions rather than facing potential conflict in addressing these problems. However, employing positive illusions to cope with relationships marked by more severe marital problems (physical or psychological abuse) may just exacerbate these problems over time. In relation to LDRRs, perhaps partners should not employ positive illusions over long periods of time and instead directly address problems associated with negotiating time apart if they want to ensure the future of their relationship.

Another interesting issue that arises deals with how partners in LDRRs that idealize their partner fair when they make a transition from LDRR to CPRR. Recent work by Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that upon transitioning to a CPRR, people formerly in LDRRs who idealized their partner were more likely to terminate their relationship than people formerly in LDRRs who idealized their partner less. This suggests that although positive illusions might act as a coping strategy for partners who deal with high relational uncertainty, this strategy does not seem to work when the relationship type changes.