

## Positive illusions about one's partner's physical attractiveness

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### Abstract

This study examined couples' ratings of self and partner physical attractiveness. On the basis of the theory of positive illusions, it was expected that individuals would rate their partners as more attractive than their partners would rate themselves. Both members of 93 heterosexual couples, with a mean relationship length of about 14 years, provided ratings of both their own and their partner's physical attractiveness. Results support the theory that individuals hold positive illusions about their partner's physical attractiveness. Implications of these results in terms of relationship-enhancing biases are discussed.

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### Introduction

During their relationship partners will frequently uncover sources of negativity and conflict that may threaten feelings of security by raising the fear that one's partner really isn't the 'right' person after all (e.g., Murray, 1999). Such doubts are troublesome because negativity typically surfaces when partners' hopes are already invested in their relationships (e.g., Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006). In order to reach some sort of cognitive resolution between their hopes and doubts and to sustain a sense of felt security, partners often weave an elaborate story (or fiction) that both embellishes a partner's virtues and minimizes his or her faults (e.g., Miller et al., 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a). Several studies have, for instance, found that individuals often rate their partner positively on characteristics such as 'kind' and 'intelligent', a phenomenon that has been called 'positive illusions' (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996a). By means of positive illusions

partners enhance their sense of security, overstate the case of commitment, and derogate alternative partners, stabilizing their long-term bond (Murray, 1999).

### *Physical attractiveness in romantic relationships*

In general, physical attractiveness is a potent factor fostering sexual attraction. Men and women both highly value a potential partner's physical attractiveness (e.g., Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990). As a consequence, physically attractive individuals have been found to be more successful in dating and to be more popular among members of the opposite sex (e.g., Green, Buchanan, & Heuer, 1984). Several explanations have been proposed to explain the importance of physical attractiveness. According to evolutionary psychologists, physical attractiveness is such a valuable characteristic because it reflects fertility (in women), dominance (in men) and health (in both sexes), attributes that contribute to individuals' chances of survival and reproduction (e.g., Buss, 1994). A social-cultural explanation proposes that physical attractiveness affects attraction through a positive stereotype. When someone is beautiful, individuals automatically

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attribute many other positive characteristics to him or her that make him/her more likeable (the so-called beautiful-is-good effect; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster (1974). Attractive individuals are, for instance, perceived as sexually warmer, more sociable, more assertive, happier and emotionally more stable than unattractive people. In addition, physically attractive individuals are perceived as more familiar than physically unattractive individuals, regardless of prior exposure (the so-called beautiful-is-familiar effect; Monin, 2003). Because, in general, higher familiarity leads to higher liking (e.g., Zajonc, 2001), attractive individuals are liked more and elicit ‘a warm glow’ in observers, at least more than unattractive individuals do (Corneille, Monin, & Pleyers, 2005). Studies also have shown physical attractiveness to be an important attribute once a relationship has started. Sangrador and Yela (2000) as well as Yela and Sangrador (2001), for instance, found perceptions of a partner’s physical attractiveness to be positively related to levels of commitment, passion, intimacy and satisfaction.

#### *Positive illusions and physical attractiveness*

The present study examined to what extent partners hold positive illusions about each other’s physical attractiveness. To establish whether positive illusions with regard to physical attractiveness exist, we should first define the concept of positive illusions. When is a perception a positive illusion? According to Murray, Holmes, and Dolderman (2000) self-perceptions may be seen as a ‘reality’ benchmark. As a consequence, positive illusions can be considered to occur when individuals perceive their partner to be physically more attractive than their partners perceive themselves. Despite its important role in mate selection and relationship satisfaction, positive illusions about a partner’s physical attractiveness have hardly been examined. Murray et al. (2000) examined self-perceptions of physical attractiveness as part of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; contains one physical attractiveness item) and reported that intimates in satisfying relationships perceived more virtues in general (total SAQ-scores) in each other than partners perceived themselves. These authors did not specifically report whether and/or to what extent they found a positive illusion for their physical attractiveness item. Because of the important role of physical attractiveness in mate selection and relationship satisfaction, the present study therefore examined positive illusions about a partner’s physical attractiveness by means of the multiple item Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984; see also Franzoi & Herzog,

1986). The BES is one of the most commonly used scales for assessing body esteem and has shown to be a reliable and valid measure (e.g., Cecil & Stanley, 1997; Franzoi, 1994). Consistent with the theory of positive illusions, we expected individuals’ perceptions of their partner’s physical attractiveness to be more positive than their partner’s self-perceptions of physical attractiveness. In addition to perceptions of physical attractiveness, the present study also assessed an objective index of physical attractiveness, i.e., individuals’ Body Mass Index (BMI). The BMI is a subject’s weight scaled for height ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ). There are five BMI categories (Bray, 1998): emaciated (below 15), underweight (15–19), normal (20–24), overweight (25–30) and obese (above 30). BMI is considered to be one of the most important objective indexes of physical attractiveness for both men and women (e.g., Swami, Antonakopoulos, Tovée, & Furnham, 2006; Swami & Tovée, 2005) and has been found to explain up to 80% of the variance of attractiveness ratings (e.g., Swami & Tovée, 2006). For women a relatively low BMI, indicating slenderness, is considered most attractive (e.g., Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Swami et al., 2006). For men a curvilinear relationship has been reported between BMI and ratings of attractiveness: both obese and thin men are considered to be less attractive than men with an intermediate BMI (e.g., Swami, Smith, et al., 2007; Swami & Tovée, 2005). A study of Swami, Smith, et al. (2007), for example, found that British women rated men with a BMI between 22 and 24 as more attractive than men with lower and men with higher BMIs. By using an objective standard for beauty we were able to investigate to what extent perceptions of physical attractiveness have a basis in reality. One could argue that, as perceptions of a partner’s attractiveness and his/her actual BMI are less related, individuals’ perceptions of their partner’s physical attractiveness are more illusionary in nature.

## **Method**

### *Participants and procedure*

The majority of participants were recruited through a postal mail survey. Names were randomly selected from Dutch telephone directories. The selected individuals (500 in total) received a letter by mail asking for their participation in a study on relationship variables. The criterion for participation was that the selected individuals were either married or cohabiting. Those willing to participate could return a preaddressed response card, on which they could also indicate if their partner was willing to participate in the study. To all

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