



## Positive illusions about a partner's personality and relationship quality

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 18 November 2010

#### Keywords:

Personality  
Relationship quality  
Positive illusions

### ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown individuals to hold positive biases about their relationships. The present study examined positive illusions about a partner's specific personality characteristics in relation to relationship quality and personality. Both partners of 120 heterosexual couples participated in the present study, making it possible to examine both partner and actor effects. Results showed that although, in general, individuals did not hold positive illusions about a partner's specific personality characteristics, positive illusions were positively related to relationship quality. In addition, interesting relations emerged between positive illusions about a partner's personality and both individuals' personality and marital duration.

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### 1. Introduction

During the course of their relationship partners will frequently uncover sources of negativity and/or conflict that may threaten their feelings of security by raising the fear that one's partner might not be the 'right' person after all (Murray, 1999). Such doubts are troublesome because this negativity typically surfaces when a partner's hopes are already invested in the relationship (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006). 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 that both embellishes a partner's virtues and minimizes his or her faults. As a result of this process, individuals tend to idealize their partner, viewing their partner more positively than he/she actually is in the eyes of objective observers or his or her own eyes, a phenomenon that is referred to as a 'positive illusion' (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b). Positive illusions are thought to enhance partners' sense of security and commitment, and facilitate the derogation of alternative partners, thus stabilizing their long-term bond (Murray, 1999). Positive illusions about a partner have indeed been found to be related positively to relationship quality and satisfaction (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2009; Murray & Holmes, 1997) and to promote relationship longevity (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996a).

#### 1.1. Positive illusions about a partner's personality

Murray and colleagues (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b) were among the first to study positive illusions. These scholars

presented participants with a 21-item measure of interpersonal qualities selected from the interpersonal circle of Leary (1957), a model based on the primary dimensions of warmth–hostility and dominance–submissiveness. More specifically, they asked individuals to rate both themselves and their partner on the following traits: 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. In addition, they selected a number of attributes considered to represent commodities in the social exchange process (Rubin, 1973), such as self-assured, sociable/extraverted, intelligent, witty, and traditional. Their studies showed that, as expected, individuals rated their partner far more positively on these (interpersonal) qualities than their partner rated him or herself.

The first goal of the present study was to systematically examine the positive illusions individuals hold about a partner's specific personality characteristics in terms of the Big Five model of personality (cf. De Raad, 2000; Goldberg, 1990). At present, the Big Five model of personality is the personality model that is most popular and well-established and that aims to provide a holistic picture of personality. According to this psycholexical model, personality consists of five basic traits, that is, extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, agreeableness and intellect/culture. Support for this model has been found in several languages and cultures (De Raad & Barelds, 2008), although it must be noted that claims regarding the universality of the model are probably premature (see, for example, De Raad et al., 2010).

The Big Five model is a far more comprehensive model of personality than the interpersonal circle of Leary (1957) on which Murray and colleagues (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b) based their studies. More specifically, the interpersonal circle of Leary (1957) encompasses only two of the traits of the Big Five model, that is,

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extraversion and agreeableness (Digman, 1990). The present study is one of the first to study positive illusions about a partner's personality, in an all-encompassing way. We know of only one previous study that examined positive illusions in terms of the Big Five model. Luo and Snider (2009) found that indeed individuals tend to positively bias their partner's personality in terms of the Big Five model. These authors, however, were not interested in potential differences in positive illusions between Big Five traits, reporting only that, across all Big Five traits, partners held positive illusions about each other's personality and that this total illusion related positively to relationship satisfaction. In contrast, the present study set out to examine positive illusions about a partner's personality, and its relation to relationship quality, separately for each of the Big Five traits. This is important because some personality characteristics in terms of the Big Five model have been found to be more tightly related to relationship quality than others. For instance, although extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness all have been found to be positively related to relationship quality, especially neuroticism (the opposite of emotional stability) has been shown to have a strong and negative impact on relationship quality (Barelds, 2005; Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004). Because positive illusions are assumed to be motivated by concerns for maintaining relationship quality, it is likely that positive illusions about a partner's personality also follow this pattern. Therefore, individuals can be expected to hold positive illusions concerning four of the five Big Five factors, that is, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness and emotional stability, but not the fifth factor (Hypothesis 1a). We also expected individuals to hold especially strong positive illusions concerning a partner's emotional stability (or lack of neuroticism; Hypothesis 1b).

The present study also related these positive illusions to relationship quality, expecting, for the reasons mentioned earlier, a positive relationship between relationship quality and positive illusions about a partner's personality (Hypothesis 2).

### 1.2. Personality and positive illusions

So far, no studies have examined the extent to which both partners' personalities relate to the strength of the positive illusions they hold about their partner's specific personality characteristics. As noted before, personality characteristics have been found to play an important role in relationship functioning and to be an important determinant of relationship quality (Barelds, 2005; Gattis et al., 2004; White et al., 2004). To date, however, it is unknown how individuals' personalities are related to the occurrence and strength of relationship biases, such as positive illusions. The second goal of the present study was therefore to examine this issue. In this context, especially emotional stability (or neuroticism) may prove to be relevant. Several studies have shown emotionally unstable (or neurotic) individuals to view their partner more negatively than emotionally stable individuals (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994; McNulty, O'Mara & Karney, 2008), suggesting that especially emotionally unstable individuals are less able or motivated to hold positive illusions about their partner's personality. We therefore expected a positive relationship between individuals' level of emotional stability and positive illusions about their partner's personality (Hypothesis 3).

Whereas most studies on positive illusions have been conducted among students or newlyweds (e.g., Luo & Snider, 2009; Murray & Holmes, 1997), the present study investigated positive illusions in a community sample of heterosexual couples with a large range in marital duration. Studying positive illusions in such a heterogeneous sample with regard to marital duration is highly relevant. It is very well possible that longer married individuals differ in the extent to which they hold positive illusions from more

recently married individuals. For instance, it may be that positive illusions are especially characteristic of the initial stages of the romantic relationship, when individuals are very much in love and, as a consequence, strongly idealize their partner. It is also possible that positive illusions remain intact but show a different relationship to relationship quality among longer married individuals than among more recently married individuals. Indications that marital duration might affect the relations between positive illusions and relationship quality were found by Barelds and Dijkstra (2009). These authors found that positive illusions about a partner's facial attractiveness related positively to relationship quality, especially among couples who were married relatively long. The present study examined how marital duration is related to positive illusions about a partner's personality characteristics in terms of the Big Five, and how marital duration affects the relationship between positive illusions of a partner's personality characteristics and relationship quality.

In sum, in addition to exploring the relationship between marital duration and positive illusions about a partner's personality characteristics, we expected individuals to hold positive illusions about a partner's personality with regard to four of the five Big Five factors, that is, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness and emotional stability, but not with regard to the fifth factor (Hypothesis 1a). We expected individuals to hold especially strong positive illusions concerning a partner's emotional stability (or lack of neuroticism; Hypothesis 1b). We also expected a positive relationship between relationship quality and positive illusions about a partner's personality (Hypothesis 2) and, finally, we hypothesized a positive relationship between individuals' level of emotional stability and positive illusions about their partner's personality (Hypothesis 3).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedure

The names of approximately 1100 individuals were randomly selected from Dutch telephone directories as part of a larger scale study on relationships. The selected individuals received a letter in which they were asked if they were willing to answer self-report questionnaires on relationships and personality anonymously. A criterion for participation was that the potential respondent was married or cohabiting and that his/her partner was willing to participate as well. Those willing to participate could return an enclosed pre-addressed response card after which they were sent a set of questionnaires by mail. Additional couples were recruited through the network of the researchers.

### 2.2. Participants

In total 198 individuals sent back a questionnaire by mail. If only one partner participated he/she was removed from the sample, as were a few homosexual couples, leaving 164 participants, or 82 heterosexual couples. Through the network of the researchers an additional 76 participants, or 38 heterosexual couples, were recruited (all cohabiting or married couples). This additional sample was intended to be heterogeneous and comparable to the first subsample with regard to relevant demographic variables (age, educational level, marital duration; because we only included heterosexual couples, participant sex was not relevant in this context). Prior to joining the two subsamples, a MANOVA was conducted, entering sample as the independent variable and age, educational level, marital duration, personality, and marital quality as the dependent variables. The multivariate effect of sample was non-significant [ $F(9, 225) = 1.16, >p$ ]. It was therefore decided to join

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