

## The Quest for Conviction: Motivated Cognition in Romantic Relationships

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*In this article I explore the motivated construal processes that allow individuals to dispel doubt and sustain conviction in the face of less-than-perfect partners and relationships. The surface features of conviction are discussed first with a focus on the positive illusions that predict relationship well-being and stability. The structural underpinnings of conviction are then discussed with a focus on the cognitive mechanisms that contain the implications of negativity within positive relationship representations. I conclude by discussing possible self-evaluation motives that may interfere with intimates dispelling doubt and finding the sense of conviction needed to sustain satisfying, stable romantic relationships.*

*“Love is a gross exaggeration of the difference between one person and everybody else.”*

The idea that individuals in satisfying, trusting relationships idealize their romantic partners permeates lay conceptions of love, as Shaw's quip illustrates. Such references usually seem tongue in cheek as they typically warn individuals of the risks of putting imperfect partners on pedestals. In fact, many psychologists argue that relationship well-being and stability depend on individuals relinquishing such seemingly naive perceptions in favor of more accurate and realistic appraisals of their partners' true virtues and faults (e.g., S. S. Brehm, 1992; Brickman, 1987).

Such admonitions, however, ignore a curious phenomenon that emerges as relationships develop. Declines in satisfaction consistently accompany individuals' keener insight into the negative aspects of their partners and relationships (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). How then are individuals to resolve the tension between the practical necessity of insight and their hopes for happiness? Should they simply try to minimize the risk of disappointment by resigning themselves to their partners' weaknesses early on? Or does lasting happiness actually necessitate benevolent transformations of a partner's perceived virtues and faults? In this article I attempt to answer these questions and, in so doing, provide a prescription for the nature and structure of relationship representations that foster well-being and stability without sacrificing insight into a partner's more obvious flaws.

### The Need for Gross Exaggeration: An Uncertainty-Reduction Model

Few decisions are as important, as life altering, or as potentially dissonance provoking as the decision to

commit to an imperfect romantic partner (J. W. Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Brickman, 1987). In perhaps no other context do adults voluntarily tie the satisfaction of their hopes, goals, and wishes to the good will of another (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Given the vulnerability that such dependence implies, individuals need to possess a sense of conviction in the conclusion that the partner really is the “right” person and can be counted on to be caring and responsive across time and situations (Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

This sense of conviction seems to require the absence of significant nagging doubts or uncertainties (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994). Even in the closest relationships, however, doubts inevitably arise because few partners are perfect, and people inevitably transgress in their relationships no matter how well-intentioned they are (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Conflicts are also virtually guaranteed because so few individuals marry or commit themselves to partners who are compatible on even basic personality dimensions (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993).

Current, but unexamined, psychological wisdom suggests that individuals should find a sense of closure in the face of such imperfect realities simply by acknowledging and tolerating their partners' weaknesses (S. S. Brehm, 1992). This prescription for conviction seems to be based on the implicit assumption that faults should pose little threat to well-being as long as they are outnumbered by the positive features of the relationship. However, growing evidence suggests that perceiving virtue may not be sufficient to quell concerns about a partner's more obvious faults (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994, 1998). Instead, the motivation to directly dispel doubt and reduce uncertainty

seems to be a relatively basic and continuing one, even in the most satisfying, secure relationships (e.g., Brickman, 1987; Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994).

For instance, happily married couples typically attribute their spouses' negative behaviors to specific, unstable features of the situation rather than make more threatening attributions to dispositional weaknesses (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1993). Satisfied, secure dating intimates also appear to protect their commitments by defensively misinterpreting their partners' possible attraction to others (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). Similarly, satisfied individuals are unlikely to think about or even look at attractive alternative partners (Miller, 1997), and they derogate available partners in efforts to support idealized views of their own partners (Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, 1987).

In this article, I outline the processes of motivated construal that foster a sense of conviction in the face of less-than-perfect partners and relationships. I first discuss the surface features of conviction, focusing on the positive illusions that predict relationship well-being and stability. I then examine the structural underpinnings of conviction, focusing on the cognitive mechanisms that contain the implications of negativity within positive, seemingly idealized, relationship representations. I conclude by discussing self-evaluation motives that may regulate the processes of motivated construal needed to sustain satisfying, stable romantic relationships.

### **A Leap of Faith: The Nature of Conviction**

If the imperatives of conviction are such that individuals cannot comfortably tolerate salient, nagging doubts and the reality of interdependence is such that occasions for doubt inevitably arise, how do individuals resolve this romantic conundrum? The existing evidence suggests that individuals in satisfying, trusting dating and marital relationships find a sense of conviction by overstating the case for commitment—by seeing partners and relationships in the best, or most positive, light possible (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

This hypothesis rests on the general assumption that the process of dispelling doubt shapes the nature of the motivated perceptions intimates construct. For instance, individuals might strengthen the perception that they really have found the "right" partner by projecting their images of the ideal partner onto the partners they possess (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a; Murstein, 1967, 1971). They might also quell any concerns about

potential personality incompatibilities by projecting their own self-images onto their partners, assuming greater similarity than actually exists (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). Second, the possibility or actual occurrence of conflict may heighten intimates' need to believe that they can control or ward off future difficulties. Third, the risk of dissolution might heighten intimates' need to believe that their future is rosy, even if most couples face an uncertain future (Helgeson, 1994).

Given these general sources of uncertainty, the perceptions that foster the sense of conviction critical for well-being might involve benevolent, even idealized, images of the partner; considerable feelings of efficacy or control in resolving differences; and unequivocally positive forecasts for the future. My colleagues and I examined the evidence for this general proposition in a series of studies exploring the existence and consequences of positive illusions in romantic relationships (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

Because most dictionaries define *illusions* as perceptions that have no basis in reality, the term *positive illusions* may be causing some readers to raise an eyebrow. In adopting this metaphor, however, my colleagues and I are not arguing that romantic partners' perceptions are patently false. Instead, we prefer to use the term *illusion* in a looser sense, one that implies that individuals base their perceptions on a kernel of truth but construe this reality in the most positive light possible. The reasons for this looser definition are both conceptual and practical. First, at a conceptual level, obvious distortions of fact, such as deciding a tone-deaf partner is a musical genius, are not likely to instill confidence or conviction. After all, even the most motivated perceivers need to feel as though their perceptions are warranted by the available evidence (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Second, at a practical level, arguing that romantic perceptions are truly illusory requires definitive benchmarks for objective reality.

In the realm of social perception, such objective standards for reality are difficult (if not impossible) to obtain. Recognizing this difficulty, the traditional definition of positive illusions centers around logical impossibilities (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). For instance, it seems at least possible that some couples are being overly optimistic if the vast majority of newlyweds state that they are less vulnerable to divorce than the typical or average couple (e.g., Helgeson, 1994). Similarly, it seems unlikely that the majority of individuals possess partners who are more virtuous

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<sup>1</sup>This trilogy should seem familiar to most readers. Taylor and Brown (1988) argued that similar illusions about the self, including idealized self-perceptions, exaggerated perceptions of control, and unrealistic optimism, appear to function as buffers, protecting self-esteem from the threats posed by negativity.

than the average partner (e.g., Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Although such perceptions provide suggestive evidence of idealism, impressions of the typical relationship do not provide a perfect reality benchmark because intimates might be depicting their own relationships accurately and derogating the typical relationship (cf. Colvin & Block, 1994).

Romantic relationships, however, provide the unique opportunity of using an interpersonal (although still imperfect) benchmark for reality. That is, the convergence between each intimate's perceptions of the same relationship provides a possible benchmark or proxy for the kernel of truth underlying romantic perceptions (e.g., Funder, 1987; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996a). Using this consensus criterion for reality, particular types of motivated divergences in judgment provide a potential indicator of positive illusions. For instance, impressions of romantic partners might be cast as motivated, perhaps even illusory, if individuals see virtues in their partners that their partners do not see in themselves (a residualized measure of illusion).<sup>2</sup> Individuals' perceptions might also be cast as overly idealistic if they are more optimistic about the future than their partners' level of optimism seems to warrant.

To pinpoint positive illusions using these reality benchmarks, my colleagues and I asked large samples of dating and married couples to describe themselves, their partners, their hopes for an ideal partner, and their impressions of the typical partner on a series of interpersonally oriented virtues and faults (e.g., kind and affectionate, critical and judgment, thoughtless, sociable). These measures provided an index of partner idealization. Participants' estimates of the amount of joint control they (and typical others) possess over positive and negative events in their relationships provided an index of efficacy (e.g., "Through our joint efforts, my partner and I can resolve any problem in our relationship"). Participants' ratings of the likelihood of a variety of positive and negative events occurring in their relationships relative to the typical relationship provided an index of optimism (e.g., "The love my partner and I share continuing to grow"; "My partner and I discovering areas in which our needs conflict in a serious way").

### Idealization of the Partner

If conviction depends on intimates overstating the case for commitment, the motivated construals that pre-

<sup>2</sup>In using the partner's self-perceptions as a "reality" benchmark, I am not arguing that individuals possess true insight into the actual nature of their own attributes. Instead, numerous studies suggest that individuals' self-perceptions are colored by some degree of positive illusions (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). But given this evidence of self-aggrandizement, self-perceptions may prove a very conservative benchmark for indexing a partner's illusions.

dict satisfaction are likely to be benevolent ones. After all, not much comfort can be gained by exaggerating a partner's stubbornness. Instead, a sense of security may be better found by seeing a partner's qualities through the generous filters provided by images of the ideal partner. In fact, such processes of wish fulfillment might even result in individuals seeing virtues in their partners that their partners do not see in themselves.

Consistent with this hypothesis, dating and married intimates who possessed rosier hopes or templates for an ideal partner perceived greater virtue in their own partners (Murray et al., 1996b). Moreover, this assimilation effect emerged in analyses where we controlled for the reality of the partner's self-perceptions. Thus, the motivated aspects of perception—the qualities that perceivers see in their partners that their partners do not see in themselves—seem to reflect the tendency to see romantic partners through the generous interpretive filter provided by images of the ideal partner.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because of such tendencies toward idealization, individuals also described their partners more positively than the typical partner (Murray & Holmes, 1997) and even more positively than their partners described themselves (Murray et al., 1996a).

Supporting the hypothesized benefits of conviction, dating and married individuals were more satisfied in their relationships the more they idealized their partners. In other words, relationship well-being was associated with a particular type of benevolence or generosity in perception: seeing virtues in romantic partners that they did not see in themselves. This claim is likely to confound some readers' intuitions about the importance of insight or understanding. After all, understanding a partner's actual, or at least self-perceived, qualities seems like a practical necessity for negotiating the demands of day-to-day life. However, individuals who idealized their partners the most were not any less insightful than individuals who idealized their partners the least. The correlation between the perceiver's perceptions of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions did not differ as a function of idealization. Moreover, insight itself was not associated with greater well-being. The match between the perceiver's perceptions of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions did not predict satisfaction in either sample.

### Efficacy and Optimism

Overstating the case for commitment involves more than just projecting images of the ideal partner onto ac-

<sup>3</sup>This evidence for idealization was not simply an artifact of method variance or general tendencies toward Pollyanna-ism. Images of the ideal partner still predicted perceptions of the actual partner when proxies for these artifacts (i.e., perceptions of the typical partner and global self-esteem) were controlled.

tual partners. Dating and married intimates also optimistically reported that the negative events that threatened others' relationships, such as poor conflict resolution skills or personality incompatibilities, were unlikely to threaten their own (Murray & Holmes, 1997). And if these events did occur, these intimates perceived greater feelings of control or efficacy in redressing such difficulties than they attributed to most other couples (Murray & Holmes, 1997). Such efficacious and optimistic perceptions were also critical for concurrent well-being. Dating and married intimates reported greater satisfaction in their relationships the greater the control they perceived and the more optimism they professed. Crucially, and attesting to the motivated nature of these perceptions, this sense of conviction was not completely warranted by the partner's perceptions of the relationship. The cross-gender or "kernel of truth" correlations were only modest. Moreover, the perceiver's feelings of optimism and efficacy still predicted satisfaction, even controlling for the component of conviction that was rooted in the reality of the partner's perceptions of the relationship.

### **The Long-Term Consequences of Positive Illusions**

It is the expectation of seeing [one's beloved] that has produced this unpleasant effect. ... What happens is that the imagination violently wrenched out of delicious reveries in which every step brings happiness, is dragged back to stern reality. (Stendhal, 1927)

The sense of conviction that predicts concurrent satisfaction seems to depend on intimates going beyond the available evidence, seeing their partners and relationships in the best, most positive light possible. Like Stendhal, some readers may be left with the lingering suspicion that positive illusions only leave individuals vulnerable to long-term disappointment (although they may instill a false sense of security in the present). After all, the conclusion that satisfaction declines over the first few years of marriage because newlyweds idealize one another too much early on seems difficult to resist (e.g., Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985).

To explore the long-term consequences of positive illusions, my colleagues and I followed a large sample of established dating couples over the course of 1 year (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996b). Contrary to Stendhal's (1927) intuitions, we did not find any evidence that positive illusions put couples at risk for disillusionment. Instead, individuals who were initially the most optimistic and perceived the greatest control were involved in more stable and ultimately more satisfying relationships (Murray & Holmes,

1997). Individuals who initially idealized their partners the most were also involved in more stable relationships, and they reported greater increases in satisfaction and declines in conflict and ambivalence as the year progressed (Murray et al., 1996b). In fact, seeing the best in their partners seemed to protect dating men from suffering any ill effects of the conflicts and doubts they did experience (Murray et al., 1996b). That is, early experiences with conflict and doubt forecast later dissolution for men who idealized their partners the least, but not for men who idealized their partners the most.

### **The Self-Corrective Nature of Idealization**

How is it the case that such motivated and benevolent construals of reality actually seem to ward off disappointment rather than ensuring it? Part of the answer may lie in the self-corrective and self-fulfilling nature of the idealization process. In the Murray et al. (1996b) study, individuals did accommodate their perceptions to the reality of their partners' self-perceived virtues and faults over the year. However, this increased level of insight was not necessarily coupled with decreased idealization. Why? Because individuals responded to this potential threat to conviction by refashioning their ideals in their partners' images—by deciding that the qualities they perceived in their partners were the ones they desired. In fact, intimates in satisfying, stable relationships did more than just convince themselves that their partners mirrored their hopes; they also seemed to convince their partners. Basking in the warm glow of a partner's rosy regard left individuals feeling more secure in their own sense of self-worth as these relationships developed.

### **The Ties That Bind: The Structure of Conviction**

Despite the popular caricature, then, positive illusions do not seem to be the root of all relationship evils. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: The absence of idealistic perceptions predicts increases in conflict and declines in satisfaction as committed dating relationships progress. Why does the strong sense of conviction underlying positive illusions have such benefits? One possibility is that ignorance really is bliss. However, individuals who possess the strongest illusions still understand their partners' self-perceived virtues and faults (Murray et al., 1996a) and they can still point to weaknesses in their relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1998). Given such evidence of reality monitoring, it seems unlikely that the benefits of conviction stem from simple forms of denial.

Another possibility is that seemingly idealized perceptions actually mask a considerable degree of sophistication or complexity in thought (Murray & Holmes, 1998). Individuals with a strong sense of conviction may respond to signs of an inexpressive, frequently stubborn, and sometimes childish partner by reconstructing or reorganizing relationship representations in ways that directly transform or minimize apparent faults. From a traditional perspective on conviction, the goal of this restructuring process is an attitude structure that has an unequivocal or internally consistent evaluative core (e.g., Chaiken & Yates, 1985; Fazio, 1986; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). In the terms of the uncertainty reduction model, the goal of this restructuring process is a relationship representation that dispels doubt by containing the implications of faults.

The metaphor of associative networks used in recent models of impression formation offers some insight into the possible structure of such internally consistent representations (e.g., Kunda, Sinclair, & Griffin, 1997; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). From this perspective, coherent or internally consistent models of others are characterized as interrelated networks in which attributes activated at higher levels in the hierarchy constrain the meaning of lower level attributes. In relationships, then, coherent, positive, even idealized, impressions may depend on motivated perceivers reorganizing their representations in ways that elevate the importance of virtues and downplay the importance of faults. In such hierarchical structures, apparent faults or weaknesses might be interpreted only in light of their links or ties to greater virtues.

### **Mechanisms of Motivated Reasoning**

If that is the case, the motivated construal and restructuring processes that sustain such integrated hierarchies should underlie a sense of conviction. As one means to this end, motivated perceivers might try to obscure their partners' imperfections by elevating the importance of virtues in their relationship representations. For instance, Sally might embellish the importance of Harry's intelligence because of her concerns about his inexpressiveness (e.g., Brickman, 1987). Individuals are successful in quelling self-doubts by inflating the importance of other personal virtues (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman 1995; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985).

However, putting the seeds of relational doubt to rest might also require more directly downplaying the significance of faults in the representation hierarchy (cf. Taylor, 1991). As one means to this end, motivated perceivers might try to find some evidence of competing virtue in apparent faults. For instance, Sally might quell her disappointment in Harry's inexpressiveness

by regarding it as a sign of his strong and silent nature. Such positive reconstruals or transformations do seem to occur, at least when dating individuals try to cope with experimentally induced concerns about their partners' faults (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994). Not all faults are so easily transformed into endearing or admirable qualities, however. In such circumstances, individuals might still maintain internally consistent perceptions by constructing "Yes, but ..." refutations that acknowledge particular faults, yet minimize their importance in the representation hierarchy (cf. Chaiken & Yates, 1985). Such protective "Yes, but ..."s might typically involve a kind of integrated or compensatory thinking where intimates link faults to related, but greater, virtues (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

Examining individuals' open-ended descriptions of their relationships seems to provide one of the best, and perhaps least reactive, methods of uncovering the nature of such cognitive restructuring processes (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994, 1995; Murray & Holmes, 1994; Schank & Abelson, 1995). Holmes and I explored this possibility in a longitudinal study of dating relationships by asking participants to write narratives describing the development of their relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1998). We also asked them to write further, mini-narratives describing their thoughts and feelings about their partners' greatest faults. Both sets of stories were reliably coded for signs of individuals perceiving, containing, and entertaining the implications of the negative aspects of their commitments. A measure of positive illusions again served as a proxy for conviction, and reports of satisfaction, trust, conflict, and ambivalence again served as our traditional measures of relationship well-being. We recontacted participants 12 months after the initial session and established the relationship's status to provide a behavioral proxy for conviction—relationship stability.

The results yielded strong support for the hypothesized underpinnings of conviction. Consistent with our structural perspective, the relationship narratives revealed intimates' efforts to elevate the importance of virtues. For instance, one person embellished the significance of her partner's supportiveness with the words, "I don't think I will ever have to doubt his love for me because he is always making me feel good about myself." Similarly, another participant commented on his partner's patience by saying that "her ability to realize this [shyness] and not force me into revealing things about myself that I don't want to attracts me to her even more." Individuals who attached such special meaning or value to their partners' virtues reported significantly greater conviction (i.e., positive illusions) and relationship well-being. Moreover, elevating the importance of virtues predicted greater relationship stability over the course of the year.

Further supporting a structural perspective on the underpinnings of conviction, the narratives also revealed many signs of intimates' efforts to downplay the importance of relationship weaknesses. Consider their thoughts about their partners' greatest fault as but one example. Almost everyone pointed to a feature of their partners' personality as the greatest fault they perceived. The most common complaints included references to a partner's jealousy, concerns about a partner's inexpressiveness, and hesitations around a partner's immaturity. As these examples illustrated, the faults that these dating individuals generated were not trivial ones. In fact, the vast majority of participants described this flaw in their partners' character as having more negative than positive effects on their relationships.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these generally negative appraisals, some participants simultaneously described this apparent imperfection as having virtuous features. For instance, one individual described her partner's jealousy as a marker of "how important my presence is in his life." Another found virtue in her partner's obstinacy by remarking, "I respect him for his strong beliefs and it helps me to have confidence in our relationship." More dramatically still, one individual commented on his partner's "short-fused judgment of people" by saying, "at first I thought she was crazy; now I think I'd miss it in her if it were to stop and I also think that the relationship would suffer if this attribute were to disappear." As we expected, individuals who found such silver linings in their partners' greatest fault reported significantly greater conviction and relationship well-being.

Not all faults were easily turned into virtues, however, and many participants responded to this potential threat by constructing "Yes, but ..." refutations that directly diminished the importance of these imperfections in the representation hierarchy. For instance, one person refuted his partner's inexpressiveness by saying "I don't place any blame on her; to me, it is just because she works things out differently in her mind." Similarly, another participant excused her partner's reticence on key issues by saying "I don't think this weighs too heavily on the relationship because he has no problem discussing other important problems with me." As we expected, downplaying the significance of faults within such integrative "Yes, but ..."s predicted significantly greater conviction and relationship well-being. More impressive still, refuting the importance of a partner's greatest fault predicted greater relationship stability over the year (even though it was only a binary index of a single behavior).

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

The findings thus far suggest that motivated construal processes that elevate virtues and minimize

faults might provide the structural underpinnings of conviction. If that is the case, downplaying, rather than elevating, the importance of virtues and elevating, rather than downplaying, the importance of faults should place relationships at risk.

The relationship narratives and greatest faults data revealed considerable evidence for this proposition. For instance, individuals less sure of their convictions tended to find evidence of fault in relational virtues. Such cynical perceptions included statements such as "no one makes me laugh the way he does, but it is not enough for a serious relationship," and "Even though my girlfriend's good traits are numerous, the poor ones take precedence in my mind." Individuals who downplayed the meaning of virtues in this way reported less conviction (i.e., illusions) and well-being concurrently, and they were at significantly greater risk for break-up. Elevating the importance of faults had similar costs. For instance, one individual commented on her partner's "not listening" with the doubt, "I think that if he really loved me then what I had to say would always be important to him." Similarly, another participant mushroomed the meaning of his partner's low self-esteem with the words "Sometimes this makes me feel like she's afraid to do things or she isn't being completely open with me." Individuals who magnified the importance of their partners' frailties in this way reported less conviction and well-being, and most crucially, they were at significantly greater risk for break-up at year's end.

### **Perception or Reality?**

Some readers might question this narrative evidence and argue that the benefits of elevating virtues and minimizing faults largely reflect the benefits of possessing partners and relationships with less serious faults. This potential criticism lies at the heart of many debates that have surrounded the motivational versus cognitive underpinnings of seemingly self- or relationship-serving biases (e.g., Kunda, 1990). After all, perceptions are not created in a vacuum, and even motivated individuals have difficulty turning a frog into a prince or princess (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). Although such debates are notoriously difficult to settle, several aspects of the findings suggest that the benefits of elevating virtues and downplaying faults go beyond any reality such restructuring processes may (or may not) reflect.

First, at an operational level, statements that were coded as "refutations" or "seeing virtue in faults" explicitly qualified the meaning or importance of the fault. Simple statements about the extremity of the fault were not sufficient to warrant these codes. Second, in terms of the nature of relationship representations, the number of virtues that individuals described

in their narratives did not predict the number of faults they perceived. Virtuous partners or relationships, then, are not necessarily perfect ones. Third, individuals who perceived more virtues in their partners were not more likely to minimize faults, as reflected in making refutations, for example. However, these minimization efforts were tied to the number of faults perceived (as expected).

Most crucially, the benefits of elevating virtues and downplaying faults persisted in further analyses where we attempted to control for the objective number and severity of the weaknesses individuals perceived. We computed one index of problem severity by summing the number of references to the partner's (or relationship's) faults in the relationship narratives. We computed a second index by averaging ratings of how positive and how negative participants perceived their partners' greatest fault to be. The coder's ratings of the seriousness of this fault constituted our third index of problem severity. We then computed sets of partial correlations between the restructuring indexes and positive illusions or well-being, controlling for each index of problem severity. All of the effects survived these most stringent tests. Regardless of problem severity, individuals were involved in more secure, satisfying, and stable relationships when they elevated virtues and diminished faults than when they did the opposite. In fact, further analyses revealed that constructing refutations had the strongest effects in predicting greater stability when individuals perceived the most, not the least, fault in their partners.

### The Ties That Bind

In confidence-instilling representations, then, a partner's positive and negative qualities seem to fit together in a unified whole or Gestalt where faults are seen in light of their ties to greater virtues in the representation hierarchy. The refutations just illustrated provide one example of how motivated perceivers might change the meaning of faults by linking them to mental reminders of a partner's more significant virtues. It is precisely this type of integrative complexity in thinking that may allow individuals to maintain a sense of conviction while still acknowledging their partners' weaknesses.

In other words, lasting conviction may depend on individuals integrating their partners' faults within more significant, positive aspects of their partners' characters. Supporting the possible existence of these ties, reminders of a close other's negative characteristics can actually elicit signs of positive facial affect when individuals perceive these faults in a new acquaintance (Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996). Similarly, Showers (1992a, 1992b) argued that feelings of self-worth depend on individuals integrating

their most important faults within positive self-aspects. A potential danger of integration, however, is that faults might actually contaminate the value of linked virtues. For instance, high-self-esteem individuals seem to protect their greatest virtues by compartmentalizing faults within isolated aspects of their characters (Showers, 1992a).

In the Murray and Holmes (1998) study described earlier, we also included measures to directly tap the possible benefits (or costs) of integrative representations. As one direct index of the presence of such mental ties, we asked individuals to indicate whether any of their partners' other attributes (either good or bad) were relevant to their feelings about their partners' greatest faults. We also obtained an index of more general representation structure by asking participants to complete a card-sort description on their partners, sorting virtues and faults into meaningful aspects of their partners' characters. In this task, the tendency to sort virtues and faults into the same (vs. separate) groups indexes integrative thinking (see Showers, 1992a).

The findings were again strongly supportive of a structural perspective on conviction. Linking virtues to faults within integrated representations predicted stronger illusions and, eventually, greater relationship stability. For instance, individuals with the strongest illusions or the greatest sense of conviction were most likely to tie their partners' greatest fault to a virtue when asked whether this fault reminded them of any other qualities. In contrast, individuals with the weakest sense of conviction were most likely to tie this fault to yet another frailty. Even more impressive, individuals who possessed more integrated views of their partners' virtues and faults on the card-sort were more likely to be in stable relationships by the end of the year. Conversely, responding to the dilemma of a less-than-perfect partner by compartmentalizing faults within pockets of doubt created a long-term vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the mental ties that bind romantic relationships appear to link qualms about a partner's frailties to comforting thoughts of greater virtues. Integrated representation might foster conviction because linking faults to virtues colors or blunts the meaning of faults (e.g., Asch, 1946; Asch & Zukier, 1984; Kunda, Sinclair, & Griffin, 1997). In some sense, stubbornness combined with caring may not be the same attribute as stubbornness combined with selfishness. Constructing integrative ties on the card-sort did seem to involve finding compensatory evidence of virtue in a partner's faults. That is, individuals with more integrative representations rated the most negative aspects of their part-

<sup>4</sup>This effect emerged in analyses where we controlled for the number of faults individuals perceived in their partners, suggesting that the benefits of integrative structure do not simply reflect the benefits of perceiving fewer faults in a romantic partner.

ners' personalities more positively than did individuals with more compartmentalized representations.<sup>5</sup>

Integrating a partner's faults within groups of related, but greater, virtues may also create built-in "Yes, buts ..." that contain or blunt the implications of faults and transgressions (when they arise). For individuals with more integrated representations, signs of their partners' stubbornness may remind them of their greater generosity or warmth (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989). The perspective gained from such balanced thinking might then facilitate constructive, accommodative responses to occasional transgressions. Apart from regulating behavioral responses, linking faults to virtues may also help regulate the course of potentially destructive emotions. For instance, individuals draw on positive recollections and self-aspects to regulate negative moods (e.g., Boden & Baumeister, 1997; McFarland & Buehler, 1997; Smith & Petty, 1995). Integrated relationship representations may facilitate this type of emotional regulation in response to feelings of annoyance or anger, particularly if signs of a partner's faults automatically prime thoughts about compensatory virtues (e.g., Showers & Kling, 1996).<sup>6</sup>

### **Idealization Necessitates Insight?**

Given that lovers are often chastised for wearing rose-colored glasses, it is ironic that intimates who possess the strongest illusions are best able to contend with the reality of a less-than-perfect partner. These individuals respond to this potential threat to conviction by linking faults to greater virtues within hierarchically structured representations. In this sense, individuals with the strongest sense of conviction are not naive at all. Instead, they show a certain wisdom in their struggle to accept their partners' faults by gaining a broader, more balanced perspective on these weaknesses. In fact, the very stability of relationships rests in part on the capacity to create such motivated and integrative mental ties.

### **Self-Evaluation Constraints on the Quest for Conviction**

The considerable benefits of conviction suggest that the need to dispel doubt is a relatively fundamental motive in romantic relationships. Individuals most successful in this quest—those who contain faults within positive, seemingly idealized representations of

their relationships—report greater concurrent well-being and, eventually, greater relationship stability. The opposite is true for individuals less successful in this quest. What might discriminate individuals who find this much needed sense of conviction from those who do not?

Writers in both the symbolic interactionist and attachment traditions argue that perceptions of the self as worthy of love are strongly tied to beliefs about others and their dispositions in relationship contexts (see Baldwin, 1992). Such reasoning suggests that dispositional insecurities on the part of the perceiver might interfere with intimates finding the sense of conviction they seek. For instance, individuals with low self-esteem idealize their partners less than those with high self-esteem (Murray et al., 1996a), and they also experience greater difficulty sustaining illusions as time passes (Murray et al., 1996b). Similarly, low-self-esteem individuals are less likely than high-self-esteem individuals to elevate the importance of virtues and minimize the significance of faults within relationship representations (Murray & Holmes, 1998). Dating individuals high on anxiety or fear of rejection (i.e., a more negative model of self) also interpret their partners' imagined and actual transgressions in suspicious ways that are likely to undermine a sense of conviction (e.g., Collins, 1996; Collins & Allard, 1997; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

Why do negative models of self pose such a threat to conviction? After all, low-self-esteem individuals are most in need of others' acceptance to bolster their tenuous sense of self-worth (e.g., Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997). In fact, low-self-esteem individuals report wanting their romantic partners to see them much more positively than they see themselves, suggesting that they see relationships as a resource for self-affirmation (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1997). Moreover, this resource is readily available: The romantic partners of lows see them much more positively than lows see themselves (Murray et al., 1997). Given their great need for this available resource, then, it seems more than a little ironic that low-self-esteem individuals are less likely than high-self-esteem individuals to find the sense of conviction they seek in relationships.

Perhaps it is precisely their dependency on relationships for a sense of self-worth that makes low-self-esteem individuals so cautious. Low-self-esteem individuals typically pursue self-enhancement goals in a self-protective fashion, taking those opportunities for self-enhancement that seem sure to affirm the self and avoiding those that pose a potential threat to the self (see Baumeister, 1993, for a review). Maybe low-self-esteem individuals approach romantic relationships in a similarly self-protective fashion, regulat-

<sup>5</sup> Again, this effect emerged in analyses where we controlled for the number of faults individuals perceived in their partners.

<sup>6</sup> The benefits of integration suggest that these motivated links may be asymmetrical in nature, such that faults call compensatory virtues to mind but thoughts of these same virtues do not call faults to mind.

ing their quest for conviction in ways that safeguard the self against threat.

Consistent with this dependency regulation hypothesis, individuals are more likely to make the leap of faith that conviction requires when they feel confident of their partners' reciprocated affections and commitment (e.g., Berscheid & Fei, 1977; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1983). For instance, dating and married individuals are more likely to idealize their partners when they believe that their partners also see special virtues in them (Murray et al., 1997). This level of confidence in a partner's reflected appraisals comes readily for high-self-esteem individuals because they correctly assume that their partners see them just as positively as they see themselves. But the same tendency toward naive realism makes a sense of confidence in a partner's acceptance elusive for low-self-esteem individuals. That is, lows dramatically underestimate how positively their partners see them because they incorrectly assume that their partners see them just as negatively as they see themselves (Murray et al., 1997).

The tendency to self-verify thus leaves lows caught in a vulnerable position in romantic relationships, needing their partners' positive regard and acceptance but doubting its existence. Such doubts about their partners' regard are likely to be particularly troublesome for low-self-esteem individuals because they believe that others' acceptance depends on them living up to certain standards (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996). In the minds of lows, then, relationships may pose more potential threats than boosts to the self because the possibility of their partners' disaffection or rejection is ever present (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996). Initial data that my colleagues and I collected suggest that low-self-esteem individuals protect against the threat of rejection (and the loss to the self it represents) by maintaining a safe distance in their relationships, seeing their partners and relationships in a less idealized light than those with high self-esteem (Murray et al., 1997). In contrast, high self-esteem individuals are more confident of their partners' regard and, feeling affirmed, see their partners in a more idealized light than those with low self-esteem.

These correlational data suggest that self-protection motives may interfere with relationship-enhancement motives for those with low, but not high, self-esteem. If this dynamic really does occur, my colleagues and I reasoned that it should be most evident in situations where a threat to the self is made salient (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). In a series of experiments designed to explore this possible tension, we first posed a threat to low- and high-self-esteem individuals' feelings of self-worth (e.g., feelings of guilt over a past transgression, fears of being an inconsiderate partner, fears of being intellec-

tually inept). We then assessed their confidence in their dating partners' positive regard and acceptance (as a measure of reflected appraisals) and perceptions of their partners (as a measure of conviction).

The results of these experiments revealed that low-self-esteem individuals react to acute self-doubt by expressing greater insecurity about their partners' positive regard and acceptance. For instance, lows reacted to doubts about their intellectual abilities by concluding that their partners would not forgive them if they transgressed in their relationships. Low-self-esteem individuals then defended themselves from the prospect of rejection by devaluing their partners, effectively safeguarding the self from the loss of this threatened resource. In contrast, high-self-esteem individuals reacted to similar self-doubts by becoming more convinced of their partners' positive regard, essentially using their relationships as a resource for self-affirmation (e.g., Steele, 1988). Such findings suggest that a sense of conviction may prove to be elusive for low-self-esteem perceivers because they cannot find the sense of security in a partner's regard that highs so readily perceive.

### Summary and Conclusions

The research I have reviewed suggests that lasting satisfaction and relationship stability depend on individuals overstating the case for commitment—interpreting and structuring the available evidence in ways that support the most positive possible views of their relationships. For instance, satisfied dating and married intimates seem to project hopes for an ideal partner onto the partners they possess, seeing virtues they wish to see but that their partners do not see in themselves. Satisfied intimates also optimistically believe that the difficulties affecting others' relationships are unlikely to trouble their own, and that if they did, they anticipate coping with such problems more effectively than most couples.

Such seemingly naive perceptions may foster relationship resiliency because they actually mask (and perhaps require) a considerable degree of sophistication or complexity in thought. That is, motivated perceivers seem to resolve the tension posed by the practical necessity of insight and their hopes for happiness by elevating the importance of virtues and minimizing the significance of faults within hierarchically structured relationship representations. For instance, individuals with the strongest sense of conviction seem to dispel doubts by turning their partners' faults into virtues, constructing "Yes, but ..." refutations, and linking faults to greater virtues within integrated mental models. The broader perspective on negativity gained from such balanced thinking may be what al-

lows motivated individuals to sustain idealized perceptions without sacrificing needed insight into their partners' more obvious flaws.

Certain realities, however, do seem to constrain these processes of motivated construal. Low- and high-self-esteem individuals both regulate relationship perceptions in a self-protective fashion, seeing the best in their partners only when they believe their partners also see special qualities in them. However, enduring insecurities about the likelihood and conditions underlying others' acceptance make this level of confidence in a partner's regard much more difficult for low- than high-self-esteem individuals to obtain. Lows then seem to protect themselves against the possibility of rejection by reserving judgment about their relationships, whereas highs can more readily make the leap of faith that seeing the best in their relationships necessitates.

Most poets, philosophers, and psychologists simply assume that relationship well-being and stability depend on intimates relinquishing idealized, seemingly naive, perceptions. The goal of this article was to argue the opposite. Growing evidence now suggests that processes of motivated construal that allow romantic partners to dispel doubts and protect a sense of conviction are critical for sustaining satisfying dating and marital relationships.

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