

Is love really so blind?

Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham discuss positive illusions in romantic relationships

Converging evidence suggests that our perceptions of romantic partners are often not based on objective reality, but are rather positive illusions. Thus, for example, we may perceive our partners as more physically attractive than ourselves, a phenomenon that has been called the 'love-is-blind bias'.

This article reviews the evidence that such illusions enhance self-esteem and, in the long-term, create better relationships. It also examines the possibility that positive partner illusions sometimes have a detrimental effect on health and sexual behaviour. For psychologists, studying positive partner illusions may prove useful in helping couples form more lasting and secure romantic relationships.

question

Would positive illusions still persist if individuals are provided with objective information about their partner's physical attractiveness (e.g. in the form of a photograph)?

resource

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In William Steig's picture book *Shrek!*, on which the computer-animated film adaptation was based, the protagonist is a green-headed ogre so hideous that 'any snake dumb enough to bite him instantly [gets] convulsions and dies'. Kicked out of home by his parents, Shrek comes upon a witch, who (after recovering from the sight of him) prophesies his marriage to a princess even uglier than he is. Shrek sets off in search of his beastly princess, 'slogging along the road, giving off his awful fumes'. He eventually finds her (though not before scaring half the countryside), and the two ogres are united in marriage (with the bride carrying a cactus for a bouquet).

For psychologists, Steig's wonderfully irreverent tale provides a literary example of what are known as positive illusions in romantic partner perceptions. Despite her monstrosity, Shrek sees in his princess such beauty that only he can comprehend. That is, he idealises his hideous princess, seeing virtues in her that may not be apparent either to her or to more objective observers. But why do such illusions exist, and what functions do they serve? Do such illusions in our romantic partners persist through time, and what happens when we are exposed to our partners' fallibilities?

In reality, our everyday experiences of social worlds and interactions are based, in part at least, on perceptions and cognitions that deviate from reality. Indeed, one of the most fruitful avenues of psychological research in the past several decades has been the documentation of such cognitive biases (e.g. Gilovich et al., 2002). More specifically, Taylor and Brown (1988) identified a

particular type of cognitive bias, which they termed 'positive illusions'. They argued that these were cognitive misconceptions or misunderstandings (as opposed to 'errors' or 'biases'), which were self-enhancing in some way.

Taylor and Brown (1988) identified three particular types of positive illusion, all of which involve comparisons that serve to differentiate the self from others: illusions of self-positivity, optimism about the future and exaggerated perceptions of control. These illusions, they argued in their review, are protective in that they buffer an individual's self-esteem in the face of threats posed by negative information. In other words, positive illusions may actually represent adaptive functioning – they may be 'characteristics of normal human thought' (Taylor & Brown, 1988), and serve to create better perceptions of the self in relation to others.

Partner perceptions

But as Taylor and Brown's (1988) review suggests, positive illusions do not occur in a social vacuum; rather, they involve perceptions of ourselves in relation to our partners (Kwan et al., 2004). In general, we tend to self-enhance in relation to others, emphasising our own positive characteristics while downplaying our negative characteristics. In combination, such illusions may serve to boost our self-esteem, and indeed, self-enhancement in relation to the perception of others is related to better mental health (Taylor et al., 2003).

But this is akin to a two-edged sword: self-enhancement within the context of any relationship also implies a derogation of our partner (whether romantic partners, friends, family, work colleagues, and so on). That is, positive illusions in the self imply that our partners do not reach the same exalted comparison, and insofar as this causes dissatisfaction, it may be damaging for the relationship. Nevertheless, self-enhancement is less pronounced in close relationships than it is in more distant relationships (Kenny, 1994). In other words, we perceive

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our intimates more positively than we do strangers or the average person (e.g. Campbell, 1986; Suls et al., 2002), possibly as a means of reducing partner derogation and its associated negative effects.

We also want to feel good about our relationships, and some studies indicate that individuals tend to hold a greater number of positive beliefs and fewer negative beliefs about their own relationships in comparison with others' relationships (e.g. Buunk & van Yperen, 1991; van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Survey data also indicate that 75 to 80 per cent of spouses describe their marriages in very positive terms (Lee et al., 1991), while underestimating their chances of divorce in comparison with other couples (Fowers et al., 2001). Favourable beliefs are held about any relationship partner in comparison with others' relationships, though the effect is strongest with increasing intimacy (Brewer, 1991).

Romantic partner perceptions

To return to our earlier example of Shrek's blindness in love, romantic partner illusions are particularly interesting because they offer an insight into the way we perceive and manage interpersonal relations with loved ones. Of course, such relationships are complex, and can influence both perceptions of the self and our partners in a myriad of ways (e.g. Rusbult et al., 2000). In general, however, the available evidence suggests that, in dating relationships, we perceive our partners more positively than we perceive ourselves (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b).

For instance, individuals in dating and married relationships tend to project images of what they consider to be their ideal partner onto their current partners, essentially imbuing them with all kinds of idealised qualities (Murray et al., 1996b). Even when they are confronted with their

partners' faults, individuals tend to deny the importance of those weaknesses (Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994). For example, when confronted with the possibility that their partners are attracted to someone else, individuals in romantic relationships often misinterpret, misunderstand or try to explain away their partners' attraction (Simpson et al., 1995). Moreover, when confronted with evidence of our partners' frailties, perhaps their neuroticism or

participants were asked to provide self-ratings and ratings of romantic partners.

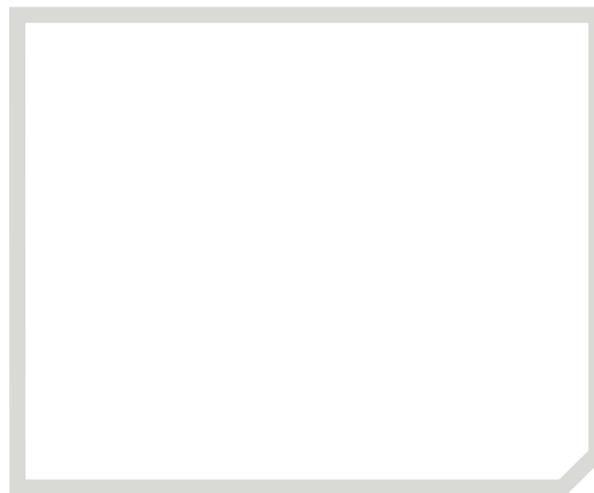
The results of this study bring to mind Shrek's idealisation of the hideous princess: both women and men in the study rated their partners as being significantly more attractive than themselves, on overall attractiveness and most individual body parts. This finding appears to be somewhat robust: earlier studies by Byrne (1971) and Murstein (1972) suggested that married couples were more likely to give their partners higher attractiveness scores than themselves. In short, this appears to be an instance of a positive illusion – what might be termed the 'love is blind illusion' – in which individuals in romantic relationships positively perceive their partners in relation to the self. An important question, however, is why such illusions exist and persist?

Leaps of faith

One possibility is that our partners really are 'better' than us: they may have more positive qualities, they may be more attractive, more virtuous, more likeable, and so on. But given that the vast majority of people hold positive illusions about their partners, it is impossible that all of us are in relationships with partners who are more positive than

the self. Indeed, the fact that positive partner illusions are so robust and widespread suggests that these really are examples of idealism (van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Some authors have suggested that positive partner illusions are simply a reflection of socially desirable responses. Edmonds (1967) developed a scale, the Marital Conventionalization Scale (MCS), to measure the tendency of individuals to endorse extremely positive statements about their relationships and partners (items included such statements as 'My marriage is a perfect success' and 'My partner meets my every need'). He argued that no marriage or partner is perfect in every way, and so the



Positive illusions involve perceptions of ourselves in relation to others

unconscientiousness, some of us may even turn those faults into veritable virtues (Murray & Holmes, 1994).

Another interesting aspect of positive partner illusions concerns perceived self- and partner physical attractiveness. As will be clear, such judgements typically involve assessment of our own and our partner's attractiveness in comparison with exalted ideals in social worlds. One example of positive illusions in relation to attractiveness judgements was provided in a study that asked participants to provide ratings of overall physical attractiveness and the attractiveness of various body parts (Swami, Furnham et al., 2007). Using a normally distributed curve of 'attractiveness ratings',

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partner perception

endorsement of statements on the MCS reflected self-deception on the part of participants, because a satisfying relationship is socially desirable.

But this interpretation of the positive bias has not received much empirical or theoretical support (Fowers et al., 2002). Most authors tend to not view positive illusions as a phenomenon that distorts participants' view of their relationships; rather, positive illusions are seen as an integral part of those views. In other words, positive partner illusions are a normal part of maintaining relationship satisfaction and commitment to the relationship (Rusbult et al., 2000).

In this sense, positive partner illusions may serve to increase self-esteem and create better relationships (Taylor & Brown, 1988). For one thing, positive illusions in others help us steer through the 'dangerous waters' of initial romance. By focusing on a potential partner's positive qualities, we feel optimistic that our chosen one lives up to ideals we hold about romance, falling in love and the ideal partner. In this sense, our initial liking for a person may not be for the actual individual we chase after, but rather for some ideal image that we have formed of her or him (Berscheid & Walster, 1978).

But as the relationship progresses and we get to know our partners that much better, we inevitably become aware of their frailties. Even among couples who have been married for many years (and for whom barriers to the dissolution of the relationship may be particularly high), the discovery of new fallibilities seems likely, especially as couples fit in to new roles (e.g. as parents). In such a scenario, discovering the 'truth' about our partners can be particularly damaging to our confidence and, in turn,

to the relationship itself (Murray & Holmes, 1997).

To help stave off feelings of deteriorating self-esteem, individuals may use positive illusions to bridge the gap between their hopes and reality, in order to be able to justify continuing the relationship. In addition to bridging this cognitive gap, positive illusions may, therefore, also dispel feelings of vulnerability, conflict and relationship deterioration. In this sense, individuals may be making a 'leap of faith' (Murray & Holmes, 1997)

when they construct illusory or idealistic images of their partners in the face of reality.

While traditionally such illusions were believed to cause negative consequences, as they lead to false cognitions about the world and



Even among couples who have been married for many years, new fallibilities can be found

personal relationships, converging evidence suggests that partner positive illusions may actually contribute to self and relationship happiness and well-being. For instance, positive illusions may help maintain a positive view of our partners, and thus improve the relationship (e.g. Flannagan et al., 2005). Thus, one 13-year longitudinal study found that positive illusions produced a more satisfying relationship during dating and early marriage (Miller et al., 2006). Specifically, newly-wed couples who were high in idealisation were more in love early in marriage and were better able to maintain those feelings over time.

In this sense, satisfaction and stability in relationships may involve an individual's ability to see imperfections in idealised ways. In another study, Murray and Holmes (1997) found that positive partner illusions predicted greater satisfaction, love and trust

(as well as less conflict and ambivalence) in both dating and marital relationships. When the researchers followed up their dating sample, they found that relationships were more likely to persist if the individuals' initial illusions were stronger. Indeed, relationships are more likely to persist even in the face of conflicts and doubts when individuals idealise one another (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b).

In short, positive illusions may predict relationship maintenance because of the commitments and involvements made by individuals in the relationship. Believing our partners to be ideal in some way makes it more likely that we will pour time and effort into maintaining that relationship. Even when we see our partners' shortcomings, we are more likely to focus on their strengths while minimising their weaknesses, and this likely fuels continued feelings of love for our partners. The end result is that positive illusions help produce more satisfying relationships (Miller et al., 2006).

Are positive illusions always positive?

But are positive illusions always beneficial? Some evidence would seem to suggest that ignoring our partner's negative attributes can be detrimental to both psychological and physical well-being. Psychologically, for example, our partners may find it difficult to constantly live up to our idealised perceptions of them. Indeed, having to perform this idealised version of themselves may cause resentment over time (Murray et al., 1996a). Rather, individuals often want their partners to see and understand their 'real' qualities, and with time grow disillusioned with 'groundless flattery' (Swann et al., 1994). On the other hand, positive illusions may also cause insecurity in ourselves. Perceiving our partners as more attractive than ourselves may provide an ego boost (Swami, Furnham et al., 2007), but it may also result in jealousy when new suitors arrive on the scene.

Some studies have also highlighted a possible link between positive illusions and

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van Lange, P.A.M. & Rusbult, C.E. (1995). My relationship is better than - and not as bad as - yours is. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 32-44.

detrimental health and sexual behaviours. Galligan and Terry (1993), for example, found that condom use was strongly mitigated by romantic ideals in heterosexual couples. Similarly, McNeal (1997) found that idealisation of romantic partners was a significant negative correlate of condom use among gay couples: the more individuals idealised each other, the less likely condoms were used during sex.

Studies such as these suggest that the gap between risk knowledge and safe sexual practices may partially be accounted for by positive partner illusions. If we ignore our partner's negative behaviours because they are inconsistent with our idealised view of them (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), this could stand in the way of healthy sexual behaviour.

Conclusion

The way we perceive our social worlds goes far beyond objective accounts of reality: such perceptions are also shaped by the mind of the beholder, and this can have very real effects on the way we initiate and maintain relationships. Insofar as positive partner illusions enhance perceptions of the relationship, they may also be self-serving in that they improve self-esteem and well-

being. On the other hand, positive illusions may also foster a false sense of security, leading us to believe that our partners really are better than they appear.

To be sure, much work remains to be done in understanding positive illusions.

First, there is some evidence that women may be more likely to hold positive partner illusions than men: Murray et al. (1996b) found that, in dating couples, women were more likely to idealise their partners. Other neglected factors include the cultural context in which positive illusions take place: Swami, Graziano et al. (2007) have suggested the partner-enhancing illusions may be stronger in collectivist cultures that

emphasise responsibility to social groups, in comparison with individualist cultures that emphasise uniqueness and individuality. To date, however, studies examining the impact of these factors on positive illusions are scarce.

Ultimately, all relationships are a product of the dialectical relationship between hope and doubt, wanting to believe and knowing the truth. In the absence of a strong relational foundation, positive illusions that are proven empty will likely cause disappointment and frustration. For psychologists and practitioners, the key will be in understanding the 'adaptive' nature of positive illusions, but also in teaching couples to accept themselves for who they really are. Love may be blind, but it should sometimes be taught to see.

"the more individuals idealised each other, the less likely condoms were used"



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