

Through the Eyes of Love: Reality and Illusion in Intimate Relationships

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*Love sees not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind.*

William Shakespeare

The view that everyday social cognition is generally rational, logical, and designed to detect the truth about ourselves and others, has taken a fearful battering from psychologists over the last five decades. Research examining accuracy in personality judgments was alive and well from the 1920s to the 1950s, but was brought to an abrupt halt by the publication of a devastating methodological critique by Cronbach (1955). In the aftermath of Cronbach's seminal article, the question of the validity of lay social judgments was simply dropped, and researchers moved to safer ground investigating the underlying processes involved in lay attributions (see Funder, 1999).

By the 1980s, however, doubts about the validity of lay social cognition had given way to bold claims that human social cognition was inherently flawed, biased, or even irrational (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). A flood of research investigating errors and biases in social cognition seemed to reveal that people are subject to a wide array of social judgment biases, including the fundamental attribution error, the false consensus effect, the confirmation bias, various self-referential and self-serving biases, and many more (for reviews see Fletcher, 1995; Kruger & Funder, 2004). Moreover, a persuasive and widely-cited literature review by Taylor and Brown (1998) argued that a subset of such biases, including the tendency for individuals to adopt Pollyannaish self perceptions and exaggerate their self control, is a marker of superior mental health, personal happiness, and healthy relationships.

The inevitable backlash duly appeared, with a rash of research and argument over the last two decades seeking to show that ordinary social cognition is not always (or even typically) wrongheaded or prone to producing illusions. Moreover, it has been argued that that accuracy and truth in social judgments can be, and often are, good things to attain and do not doom people to sad, unhealthy lives with impoverished relationships (for reviews see Fletcher, 1995; Krueger & Funder, 2004).

Relationship researchers entered the fray about a decade ago, and on both sides of the argument. One general model (we shall term the "love is blind" thesis), reflecting the Bard's lines at the beginning of the chapter, argues that normal, healthy, lay social cognition is typically positively biased and over-optimistic. According to this approach, the motivation to retain a positive and healthy level of self-esteem, and by extension a positive level of relationship-esteem, is assumed to be a pervasive motive. A second general model (I will term the "relationship reality" model) proposes that people are often motivated by the desire to perceive the truth in relationship contexts (even it is hard to handle), that such judgments are frequently accurate, and that a firm grasp of relationship reality is necessary for healthy functioning relationships.

We shall examine the evidence and merits for these two models in due course. It is important to note, however, that much is at stake in the outcomes of research and argument in this domain. For example, the entire field of mate selection, from an evolutionary psychological stance, is presaged on the assumption that certain qualities

in a mate - attractiveness, kindness, status, and intelligence – would (and did) confer advantages in terms of reproductive success. Physical attractiveness, for example, is often regarded as a primary cue for “good genes”, whereas personality traits like ambition and kindness signal the individual will be a supportive and effective parent and mate over long periods of time (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). However, this argument assumes that individuals can (and do) pick up such information in a reasonably accurate fashion. If lay judgments of such qualities are (or were) hopelessly biased and inaccurate, then the use of such criteria could not have evolved as adaptations, and love would be truly blind.

In this chapter we initially lay out the cases for the two models in question (love is blind versus the relationship reality model). Second, we conceptually tease apart the complex concept of bias, distinguish it from accuracy, and describe some relevant empirical findings. Third, we move to the study of accuracy in intimate relationships. Fourth, we briefly list some of the important predictors of bias and accuracy, taking particular note of when the predictors are dissimilar. Finally, we make some general theoretical points, attempt to integrate the findings, and make a stab at answering the question posed in the title.

Opening Gambits

To recap, the “love is blind” thesis, in essence, claims that love generates overly sanguine views of close partners and relationships. Thus, unless people view their relationships through rose-colored glasses, individuals may find it difficult, if not impossible, to commit themselves to serious long-term relationships or to actively cultivate relationship happiness. Relationship happiness (and associated personal well-being) and the maintenance of illusions, thus, go hand in hand (Murray, 2001).

A plausible *prima facie* case, however, can also be made for the “relationship reality” model. This model proposes that individuals should typically be motivated to view and understand their partners and relationships accurately, and that a firm grasp on reality is required for healthy personal and relationship functioning. Moreover, the way in which primary relationships are central to well-being, which is used to support the “love is blind” model, can also be used in support of this model. Close relationships can produce either long-term happiness or misery; thus, individuals should be powerfully motivated to use their cognitive talents to the full in divining the true nature of their partners and relationships. The extent to which judgments of potential partners as honest, warm, ambitious, or trustworthy, are accurate would seem have profound implications for the future well-being of the individual.

Both models are therefore theoretically plausible. Moreover, both models are supported by extensive empirical evidence (for reviews, see Fletcher, 2002; Gagne & Lydon, 2004; Murray, 2001). Murray and her colleagues, for example, have shown that people deal with doubts that might corrode commitment and trust by restructuring their judgments and stories of their relationships. Moreover, as love prospers, individuals tend to idealize their partners more, exaggerate similarities between themselves and their partners, and subsequently develop happier, more stable relationships (see Murray, 2001).

The relationship reality model, in turn, has broad-based empirical support. Key relationship evaluations (such as commitment, satisfaction, and trust) are typically anchored in the objective realities of relationships, are observable by outsiders, and reliably predict the future course of relationships (see Fletcher, 2002). Individuals who evaluate their partners and relationships more positively also discuss relationship problems in a more constructive fashion (e.g., Fletcher & Thomas, 2000). Finally, romantic partners also share similar relationship evaluations (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001), and the negativity of such evaluations is one of the best predictors of relationship dissolution (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

We are, thus, left with striking paradox. On one hand, individuals tend to perceive and evaluate their romantic partners and relationships in enhancing, overly positive ways. On the other hand, they typically perceive and evaluate their partners/relationships in an accurate, reality-based manner. As noted by Fletcher, Simpson, and Boyes (2006, p 92) “love seems to be both blind and to possess a firm grasp of reality”!

Bias

Resolving the paradox just presented requires negotiation through a dense methodological and empirical thicket. To begin with, the concept of bias itself is a slippery customer. One way of defining bias is in terms of the way in which prior (lay) theories influence the way in which new information is processed. It is a truism (with countless research examples) that laypeople’s judgments are influenced by their prior beliefs, attitudes, or lay theories if you will. The same phenomenon is also well demonstrated in the relationship literature. In the attribution field, for example, many studies have shown that prior evaluations of relationships influence the way in which individuals explain each others’ behavior (see Fincham, 2001, for a review). For example, those in blissful relationships tend to write off their partners’ negative behavior with external attributions (e.g., explaining surly behavior with an attribution like suffering stress at work), whereas those in unhappy relationships tend to accept the deleterious implications of negative behavior with internal dispositional attributions (e.g., explaining surly behavior with an attribution like insensitivity).

In a similar vein, it has been reported that those in happier and more stable relationships exaggerate the extent to which they are similar to their partners (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin & Dolderman, 2002), exaggerate the extent to which they were happy at prior times in their relationships (Karney & Frye, 2002), exaggerate the positive qualities of their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a), and exaggerate the extent to which their partners resemble their ideal partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b), and the list could go on.

However, demonstrations of such bias do not show that people are systematically irrational, blind to the truth, or unscientific in any way. Scientists of all stripes quite properly use their theories to explain or interpret data routinely and pervasively (Fletcher, 1996), and weight the import of the data accordingly (a variant of Bayes’ theorem). In the same fashion, laypeople make judgments under conditions of uncertainty that reflect both the nature of the incoming data and their extant relationship theories (both local and general). For example, if Melissa is asked to make judgments about how similar she is to Owen along some personality

dimensions, she will do so (in part) by accessing both her general and her local partner and relationship theories. If Melissa is in a very happy relationship, and she believes that more similarity in relationships produces more successful relationships (a common belief), this will quite rationally lead to biased judgments. In short, theory guided judgments, either scientific or lay, are (by definition) biased judgments.

Of course, if individuals routinely ignore the incoming data (e.g., behavior from their partners) and rely completely on their pre-existent beliefs or lay theories (including relationship evaluations), then this would certainly show love is blind (and that laypeople are irrational). But the research evidence does not show this. Instead it reveals that specific judgments and decisions in relationships are jointly determined both by both pre-existent knowledge lay theories and new information, and that relationship evaluations, beliefs, and so forth are not set in concrete but change in the face of new information (see Fletcher, 2002).

One of the most common benchmarks used in prior research to objectively assess bias is simply the relevant self-perceptions of the target being rated (e.g., Boyes and Fletcher, 2007; Gagne & Lydon, 2003; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). This research consistently reveals that people tend to rate their partners more positively than their partners rate themselves, revealing a partner-serving bias. One of the reasons this is regarded as a particularly persuasive demonstration of bias is that the benchmarks (self-perceptions of the target) are themselves almost certainly on the positively biased side.

However, studies that rely on comparisons between two sets of means need careful interpretation (in this case comparing mean attributions of specific traits of the perceiver with mean self-judgments on the same trait of the target). Consider the following example (adapted from Fletcher, 2002), Henry rates Elizabeth (using 1-7 Likert scales) as being very honest (7), very sincere (6), sensitive (6), and moderately ambitious (5). Susan rates herself on the same dimensions as pretty honest (5), quite sincere (4), reasonably sensitive (4) and not very ambitious (3). This pattern (consistent with the research evidence) shows that Henry is positively biased (he is on average two units more positive than Elizabeth's self assessments). However, it is also apparent that Henry is accurately tracking Elizabeth's self ratings across the four traits (with a correlation of 1.0). It is easy to demonstrate, with different patterns of hypothetical results, that Henry could also be biased and inaccurate, or unbiased and accurate, or unbiased and inaccurate. In short, bias (assessed by comparing mean levels of positivity for the perceived judgments versus the reality benchmarks) and accuracy (assessed by using correlations between the perceived judgments and the reality benchmarks) can be independent.

This analysis suggests it is possible to have the best of both worlds – to adopt a rose-tinted view of a relationship and partner, yet simultaneously appraise them in a realistic fashion. Thus, this distinction may be a (partial) solution to the conundrum previously described. Indeed, studies that have assessed both bias and accuracy (along the lines illustrated above) support such a conclusion. Murray et al. (2002), for example, found that women who are more egocentric (i.e., who view their partners as more similar to themselves than is warranted – an example of bias) tended to understand their partners more accurately. Sprecher (1999) found that, over time, individuals involved in dating relationships retrospectively rated their earlier levels of

love and satisfaction as being on a higher upward trajectory over time than was in fact the case (an example of bias). For example, those individuals who had level trajectories of satisfaction over time tended to recall that they had steadily become happier. Nevertheless, the sample overall quite accurately retrospectively tracked and reported *relative* increases or decreases in love and satisfaction over past periods in their relationships. And, finally, Epling and Dunning (2006; studies 3 and 4) found evidence that individuals are positively biased when predicting how long their relationship would last, but are also quite accurate.

Finally, in response to our prior arguments, a critic could plausibly argue that although both scientists and laypeople are typically biased in that they both interpret data in the light of pre-existing theories, a crucial difference is that scientists are explicitly aware of such bias, whereas laypeople remain blithely unaware of such influences, and will often deny they are biased (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005). Indeed, researchers almost invariably treat biased relationship judgments as products of unconscious, intrapsychic processes. This seems a reasonable assumption given that if people recognized that their partner judgments were more positive than warranted by reality, it seems (at face value) that such meta-knowledge would be likely to undercut the original beliefs.

Yet, it is possible, even plausible, that people may consciously desire positively biased appraisals from their partners, and be aware (to least to some extent) of the way in which such appraisals (from partner to self or self to partner) may be, in reality, positively biased. First, the idea that love in intimate relationships distorts the accuracy and objectivity of interpersonal judgments is a plausible and culturally accessible notion. For example, there exist well-known proverbs making this point (e.g., “love is blind” or “a face only a mother could love”). Literature, plays, and movies also frequently embody the same idea. Second, a garden-variety interaction in intimate relationships involves reassuring the partner about doubts or negative self-perceptions. For example, when Mary wonders aloud about her academic ability, or whether she will get a new job, or if she is too fat, then her partner is likely to assure her she is smart, that she has a good chance of landing the job, and that she looks great. Indeed, it may be a normative requirement in (happy) intimate relationships that partners should provide supportive feedback in such circumstances, even if it means gilding the lily.

Boyes and Fletcher (2007) tested such speculations in three studies. In Study 1, they found that participants rated fictional partners in happy relationships as unrealistically positively biased in their partner perceptions compared to those in unhappy relationships. Thus, people seem to believe that love does indeed distort people’s perceptions. In Study 2, a sample of individuals in existing romantic relationships, both desired and believed that they were judged by their partners in a positively biased fashion (on key mate selection dimensions such as attractiveness, warmth, and ambition). Critically, they also believed they were unrealistically biased in their perceptions of their partners. In Study 3, using a sample of couples, it was found that such meta-perceptions of bias were anchored to actual levels of bias at the individual/relationship level. Taken together, these findings suggest that positive bias in partner judgments can be a normative and consciously accessible feature of intimate relationships.

Importantly, the knowledge that people exhibited of the levels of bias in their relationships was not a function of relationship quality, relationship length, self-esteem and depression – controlling for these factors did not change the results in any of the relevant analyses. Thus, the accuracy attained by individuals was not merely a product of individuals accessing and using overall evaluations of self, partner, or the relationship (sentiment override) but rather was based on the assessments of bias in the attribution of specific traits.

That people realize their partners' perceptions of self are biased is relatively unproblematic theoretically. However, participants in this research also believed (correctly) that their own perceptions of their partners tended to be positively biased, and this may seem counter-intuitive. If people are aware of such biases, then why don't they adjust for them when asked to straightforwardly rate their partners' qualities? Boyes and Fletcher (2007) proffer the explanation (not original we hasten to add) that the social mind is split into two basic components, that appear contradictory but that may be walled off from one another, and, thus co-exist quite happily. One component is designed for accuracy, and the search for truth, whereas the other component is concerned with producing a feel-good orientation and functions to maintain a cheerful and optimistic approach to life. Laypeople, on this view, are both scientists and cheer leaders, capable of switching rapidly from one mode to the other depending on the demands of the situation, their levels of motivation, and so forth.

Note that Boyes and Fletcher (2007) do not claim that the findings from this research will generalize to every kind of judgment or underlying process. They argue that lay meta-awareness, and associated accuracy, in judgments of bias in relationship settings will be enhanced by two criterial features, both found in their research. First, the existence of an accessible and relevant folk theory or belief (e.g., love is blind) should sensitize individuals to the occurrence of related positive biases. Second, if the judgments in question - such as self and partner judgments of attractiveness - are embodied in frequent interpersonal behavior (e.g., explicitly discussed) the biases will become observable in action, and thus, be more likely to be noticed and recalled.

Accuracy

We have already established that bias (however it is measured) is endemic in intimate relationship contexts. But how accurate generally are people in relationship settings? The answer is that studies generally reveal quite respectable levels of accuracy obtained by the judges (usually in the $r = .20$ to $.60$ range), using a range of external criteria/variables, including self-reported perceptions by relationship partners (e.g., Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), perceptions of observers of the relationship (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), observer ratings of behavioral interactions (Simpson, Orina, & Ickes, 2003) or (using longitudinal designs) memories or predictions that can be matched with self-reports gathered either previously or later (e.g., Sprecher, 1999).

From an evolutionary angle (as previously noted) it is especially important to know how accurate people are in assessing attributes that are pivotal in mate selection contexts, including physical attractiveness and personality traits such as warmth and kindness. The evidence shows that physical attractiveness is rated quite accurately on the basis of quite minimal observations or interactions. For example, Marcus and Miller (2003) had participants rate their own physical attractiveness and that of other

men and women who were sitting together in small groups. There was good consensus on the level of attractiveness for specific targets, and targets' self-perceptions generally matched well with how they were perceived (correlations ranging from .28 to .53). Moreover, individuals' meta-perceptions of how they were perceived generally by others were accurate (with correlations ranging from .26 to .49). As the authors conclude, "we know who is handsome or pretty, and those who are attractive know it as well" (p. 344). From an evolutionary standpoint, one would also expect men to produce particularly accurate perceptions of women's attractiveness and women should be on the money when it comes to judging how they are rated by men. Both predictions were confirmed. The highest level of consensus was reached by different men rating the same women (41% of the target variance), and the most accurate meta-awareness was achieved by women rating how they were generally perceived by men ($r = .49$).

In contrast to physical attractiveness, the accuracy in rating strangers in terms of traits, such as warmth and kindness, is typically abysmal, but does climb to quite respectable levels as a function of increased closeness and knowledge of the target (Funder & Colvin, 1988; Thomas, 1999; Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006). For example, Thomas had individuals observe men and women currently involved in sexual relationships having a 5 minute discussion of capital punishment, and then rate each partner on the Big Five traits. Self-observer agreement was low for all five categories when strangers carried out the task (mean $r = .10$), considerably higher when friends carried out the same task (mean $r = .34$), and even better when partners rated each other (mean $r = .41$). Consensus across raters told the same story, with good agreement across partners and friends when rating the same targets (mean $r = .34$) and weak consensus across strangers and either partners and friends (mean $r = .09$).

One important subset of studies has compared the accuracy of observers (i.e., people who know one or both relationship partners well) to relationship insiders (i.e., the relationship partners themselves). The results of these studies have been mixed. MacDonald and Ross (1999), for example, found that college students made more positive but less accurate predictions about the longevity of their current dating relationships than either their roommates or their dating partners' parents. However, this result was not replicated by Loving (2006), who also found (as did MacDonald & Ross) that the best predictors consisted of the daters' self-reported levels of commitment. Thomas and Fletcher (2003) used a mind-reading paradigm in which long-term dating couples initially engaged in a problem-solving discussion. After the discussion, each individual reported the private thoughts and feelings that s/he had during the discussion. Each individual then tried to infer the thoughts and feelings of his/her partner during the discussion as accurately as possible. Mind-reading accuracy (i.e., empathic accuracy) was assessed by having raters compare the thought/feeling inferences of each individual against the actual thoughts and feelings reported by his/her partner. Relationship partners were significantly more accurate than either the close friends of each couple or total strangers (who also viewed the videotaped discussions and completed exactly the same tasks). The research suggests that, at least sometimes, the extra information and knowledge afforded by being a relationship insider trumps the additional objectivity and freedom from bias gained by being an outsider.

Predicting Bias and Accuracy

In addition to the research described above, increasing attention has been given to the prediction of accuracy and bias in intimate relationships. Consistent with our developing argument, it turns out they often seem to have different antecedents. This is not the place for an extensive literature review, but a selection of illustrative research examples should suffice to make the main points.

First, various individual differences have been found to predict accuracy and bias in relationship contexts. Women have been found to be superior mind readers to men (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), and do better than men in predicting the likelihood of their relationships breaking up (Loving, 2006). There are also scattered findings suggesting that those higher in social intelligence and IQ produce more accurate mind reading in relationship contexts (see Fletcher, 2002). Mikulincer and his colleagues have reported evidence in several studies that more securely attached individuals are less prone to defensively bolster a biased sense of consensus or uniqueness (for a review see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

Second, there is good evidence that situational factors also play a role, particularly as they interact with individual differences such as attachment working models. For example, when the relationship is under threat, anxious-ambivalent individuals become more accurate in mind-reading the extent to which their partners find other individuals attractive, whereas secure individuals are motivated to become less accurate (see Ickes and Simpson, 2001).

Third, the nature of the judgment also seems to be a central moderating factor. Boyes and Fletcher (2007, Study 3) found that individuals evinced large and significant amounts of positive bias for partner judgments that are central to intimate relationships (e.g., sexy, warm), but were much more even-handed for judgments that were more peripheral to mate selection and the evaluation of ongoing relationships (e.g., talkative, organized). Moreover, these results controlled for the degree of globality of the judgments (reflecting prior research, in this study globality and relationship-relevance of a range of attributes, as rated by a set of observers, correlated positively; $r = .44$).

Fourth, the nature and stage of the relationship also seem to have complex links to both bias and accuracy. As reviewed earlier, a commonly replicated finding shows that more positively biased partner and relationship perceptions are associated with greater relationship satisfaction. However, studies examining the link between accuracy and relationship satisfaction have reported a more inconsistent pattern of findings, with weak or null findings often reported (e.g., Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). However, certain variables may moderate the accuracy-satisfaction link. In Thomas and Fletcher's (2003) mind-reading study, for example, among partners involved in longer-term relationships more accurate partner mind-reading predicted greater relationship satisfaction. Among those involved in shorter-term relationships, on the other hand, more accurate partner mind-reading actually predicted *less* satisfaction. Thomas and Fletcher speculated that the problem-solving discussions might have been more threatening to individuals involved in newer relationships, which could have generated more defensiveness and, therefore, less accurate partner

mind-reading. In a consistent vein, Campbell, Lackenbauer, and Muise (2006) reported that when individuals in romantic relationships (who had negative self-perceptions) were given bogus feedback about the extent to which their partners agreed with their self views, their responses depended on the length of the relationship. Those in newer relationships were more likely to prefer positively-biased views, whereas those in long relationships felt more valued and closer to their partners when they received harsher but more realistic assessments.

Fifth, Simpson, Fletcher, and Campbell (2001) have proposed that the “love is blind” and the “relationship reality” models described previously are represented in lay cognition in terms of two central motives – a feel-good, optimistic stance, and a reality-based desire to seek out the truth. The best evidence to date for this proposal has been provided by Gagne and her colleagues (see Gagne & Lydon, 2004, for a review), who have carried out a series of studies in which they have manipulated a deliberative (pre-decisional) versus an implemental (post-decisional) mind-set. For example, in one study, (Gagne & Lydon, 2001, Study 3) individuals in dating relationships were required to either describe the pros and cons of an undecided relationship project (e.g., should they live together) or to describe how they planned to achieve a project to which they were already committed (e.g., finding a suitable apartment). Participants who were encouraged into a rational, even-handed, deliberative frame of mind produced considerably more accurate predictions concerning how long their relationships would last, compared to those who were making the same prediction while in an esteem–maintenance, implemental mind-set.

Integration and Conclusions

To begin integrating these findings in a powerful explanatory fashion, it is helpful to locate them in the general context of what else we know about intimate relationships, and to apply standard approaches that have already proved their mettle in the scientific market place including evolutionary and social psychological theories.

First, findings that women are more accurate than men in mind-reading their partners, and predicting the fate of their relationships, are consistent with a raft of findings suggesting that women are generally more motivated and expert lay psychologists than men (for a review see Fletcher, 2002). We think the most plausible and parsimonious explanation for this gender difference is in terms of Triver’s parental investment theory; namely, women invest in children and the sexual relationship more than men, and are thus programmed to be more motivated lay psychologists in intimate relationship contexts. The costs for women of getting it wrong in intimate relationship settings are slightly higher than for men.

A psychological evolutionary approach also suggests that we should look to the possible functions of endemic biases in social perception (see Haselton & Nettle, 2006). From an evolutionary approach, love is an evolved mechanism that bonds individuals together in a powerful and committed fashion in order to enhance the support and care given to offspring, and thus increase the chances that the parents’ genes are sent into the future. The rose-tinted, optimistic, eyes of love are, on this account, simply part of this bonding mechanism. On the other hand, an evolutionary approach would also suggest that when the costs of getting decisions wrong are

momentous (as they surely are in mate selection or retention contexts), then people should be motivated towards achieving accurate and balanced judgments of their partners and relationships.

The distinction we made between bias and accuracy, and the associated research, goes some way towards resolving this conundrum. Individuals can (and often do) embrace a charitable, optimistic view of their partners, while simultaneously keeping a realistic track of their partners' traits and qualities (it seems that people can have their cake and eat it too). There is also a long list of conditions that seem to restrict the operation of such biases. First, there is evidence that such rose-tinted biases are largely confined to traits that are highly relevant to the success of intimate relationships (such as warmth, attractiveness, and ambition) and may not extend to any and all traits and characteristics. Second, there is evidence that individuals (even those in love) are capable of reverting to a more rational and realistic way of thinking, depending on the conditions and the goals of the perceiver. Thus, being asked to move to another city and give up an existing job (a substantial elevation in commitment) by one's partner in the throes of a romantic fling may well motivate a detailed and even exhaustive analysis rather than prompt an immediate romantic leap into the unknown. Third, individuals involved in romantic liaisons seem to be aware at some level that their perceptions are biased and not entirely veridical, which implies that a cognitive retreat to a more realistic set of appraisals is always a possibility.

The picture generated by the research is also consistent with a social psychological approach that emphasizes the centrality of interactions between the person and the situation in explaining and predicting affect, behavior, and cognition. Indeed, the research suggests interactions are par for the course. To pick one example, the link between relationship satisfaction and accuracy appears to be moderated by the length of the relationship – at the early stages of relationships more accuracy is associated with less happiness, at the later stages the opposite pattern seems to hold. To pick another example, the presence of threat in a close relationship (e.g., the presence of an attractive and available alternative mate for one's partner) motivates secure individuals to misread their partners' thoughts and feelings, whereas anxious individuals become more devastatingly accurate in such mind readings.

To conclude, it seems clear that the confidence and ability to commit to long-term sexual relationships are facilitated by the production of positively-biased interpretations, personality attributions, and mind readings of the partner and relationship. However, it is equally apparent that people in happy and successful relationships also typically develop accurate and prescient beliefs and perceptions of their partners, with the ability to remove their rose-colored glasses when the need arises. Investigating the way in which people manage the feat of maintaining and using appropriately both sets of goals and judgments promises to reveal important insights into the nature of the intimate relationship mind.

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