Metaperceptions of Bias in Intimate Relationships

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Meta-awareness of bias in intimate partner judgments was investigated in 3 studies. In Study 1, participants rated fictional partners in happier relationships as more positively biased in their partner perceptions. In Study 2, participants thought their judgments of their own current partners were positively biased and that they were judged by their partners in a positively biased fashion. Using a sample of couples, Study 3 showed that metaperceptions of bias were anchored to actual levels of bias at the individual and relationship levels. In addition, positive bias was accentuated for traits that were more relevant to mate evaluation. These findings (as expected) suggest that positive bias in partner judgments can be a normative and consciously accessible feature of intimate relationships.

Keywords: partner perceptions, metacognition, bias, accuracy, relationship satisfaction

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies
—William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 138*

Social psychologists have often noted a paradox in the study of bias and accuracy in relationship judgments (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Boyes, 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; Neff & Karney, 2002a; Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). On one hand, it seems important for individuals to produce accurate and impartial judgments of potential or ongoing romantic partners, given the central role that intimate relationships play in human lives. In a consistent vein, many individuals express desires for an authentic, open, and honest relationship (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). On the other hand, entrusting one's happiness to another person seems to require a leap of faith and the need to see one's partner through rose-colored glasses. Indeed, relationships in the real world seem to be replete with illusions, in which individuals systematically bias their judgments of one another in a positive direction (see, e.g., Murray, 2005).

Several attempts have been made to resolve this apparent contradiction, including making an important distinction between bias and accuracy (Fletcher et al., 2006; Gagne & Lydon, 2004) and postulating moderating variables that influence bias or accuracy, such as truth seeking versus positivity motives (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2006; Gagne & Lydon, 2004) and judgment type (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2002a, 2002b; Swann et al., 2002). All these proposals have merit in our view. However, the current research raises another possibility—one that, to our knowledge, has not been examined in prior research but has an ancient lineage as embodied in the famous sonnet by Shakespeare quoted above—namely, that

people know in a general sense that happy intimate relationships are characterized by positivity biases and can make accurate judgments about levels of bias in their own specific intimate relationships. From this perspective, although people typically produce biased judgments in relationship contexts, they may be under no illusions concerning the existence and magnitude of such biases.

Measuring Bias and Accuracy

Assessing either bias or accuracy involves making use of a comparison benchmark. In this research, we measured perceived bias, for example, by asking participants to compare their normal perceptions of how sexy their partners are with their (rational) judgments of how sexy their partners are in reality. Perceived bias can thus be measured by the extent to which people rate the judgments of their partners as more positive than (perceived) reality. However, we also assessed the extent to which perceived bias was related to actual levels of bias, and for that a benchmark independent of the perceiver is required. 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., Fletcher & Boyes, 2004; Murray et al., 1996a; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b). Moreover, there is a considerable body of research suggesting that self-perceptions, although obviously imperfect criteria for benchmarks of reality, can represent reasonably accurate indicators of personality traits (Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000), especially traits that are central in mate evaluation and selection contexts such as kindness, attractiveness, and status (see Fletcher & Overall, in press, for a review).

It is important to note that bias and accuracy can happily coexist. We illustrate this point by considering the partner judgments of three men in heterosexual relationships. Jim rates his partner Charlotte as incredibly attractive, Richard rates his partner Poppy as moderately attractive, and Harry rates his partner Jane as only average on attractiveness. In reality, on the basis of some objective, hypothetical gold standard, Charlotte is moderately attractive, Poppy is average, and Jane is unattractive. As can be seen, the men are positively biased overall (their judgments are consistently more positive than reality), but overall they are quite accurate (they are

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tracking reality). Of course no such gold standard of reality exists. Thus, in this research, we used the relevant self-perceptions of the partner as a reasonable benchmark with which to index levels of both bias and accuracy of the perceiver.

This example of bias and accuracy coexisting is not merely apocryphal. Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, and Dolderman (2002), for example, found that women who were egocentric (i.e., who viewed their partners as more similar to themselves than was warranted—a clear example of bias) tended to understand their partners more accurately. Sprecher (1999) reported that those individuals who had flat trajectories of satisfaction over time tended to recall (in a positively biased fashion) that their relationships had steadily improved. Nevertheless, the sample overall quite accurately retrospectively tracked and reported relative increases or decreases in love and satisfaction over past periods in their relationships. In the current study, we took care to distinguish between bias and accuracy.

Metaperceptions of Bias in Intimate Contexts

Prior research suggests that positivity biases (typically measured by using self-perceptions as the relevant benchmark) are endemic in partner and relationship perceptions. For example, on average, partner judgments are significantly more positive than targets' self-perceptions (e.g., Fletcher & Boyes, 2004; Murray et al., 1996a). Furthermore, people tend to (a) exaggerate the degree to which they are similar to their partners (Murray et al., 2002), (b) retrospectively embellish their memories of being happy at earlier points in their relationships (Karney & Frye, 2002), (c) exaggerate the degree to which their partners resemble their ideal partners (Murray et al., 1996b), and (d) see their relationships as superior to others' relationships (Fowers, Veingrad, & Dominicis, 2002; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Most researchers have (typically implicitly) treated biased relationship judgments as products of unconscious, intrapsychic processes. Such cognitive processes include rewriting relationship memories (Karney & Frye, 2002), making relationship-serving attributions (Fincham, 2001), assuming similarity between the self and the partner (Murray et al., 2002), or reducing ideal-perception discrepancies (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000a). Indeed, if people recognized that their partner judgments were more positive than warranted by reality, it seems at face value that such metaknowledge would be likely to undercut the original beliefs. Yet, it seems plausible to us that people consciously desire positively biased appraisals from their partners and are aware (to some extent) of the way in which such appraisals (from partner to self or self to partner) may be, in reality, positively biased. We expound four arguments for these hypotheses.

First, a necessary condition for the existence of reliable metaknowledge of biased partner judgments is that such judgments are not locked inside the individual's mind but are commonly expressed in terms of readily observable behavior. In this regard, it is important to note that although relationship and partner judgments are frequently Pollyannaish, such judgments are nevertheless tuned into objective interpersonal realities, which are both observable by outsiders and reliably predict the future course of the relationship (Fletcher, 2002). For instance, people who evaluate their partners and relationships more positively tend to discuss relationship problems in a more constructive fashion (Fletcher & Thomas, 2000).

Romantic partners also share similar relationship evaluations (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001), and the negativity of relationship evaluations is one of the best predictors of relationship dissolution in both dating and married couples (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Second, the idea that love in intimate relationships distorts the accuracy and objectivity of interpersonal judgments is both plausible and culturally accessible. 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.

Third, partners convey how they view each other in the context of their shared day-to-day interactions. One kind of interaction involves reassuring the partner about doubts or negative self-perceptions; for example, when Jim expresses doubts about his own levels of intelligence or wonders whether he will get a promotion or whether he looks too fat in a particular pair of trousers, then Charlotte may well assure him he is bright, that he has a good chance of getting his promotion, and that his trousers look great. To the extent that such interactions are common, individuals are likely to be aware of the relative standing of their perceptions of their partners vis-à-vis their partners' self-perceptions and vice versa. Indeed, it may be a normative requirement in (happy) intimate relationships that when individuals express self-doubt, partners should provide supportive feedback, even if it means gilding the lily or telling a white lie. Moreover, people frequently discuss their relationships and partners with other people or receive feedback, which may be discordant with their own overly positive perceptions, thus highlighting the possibility that their partner judgments may well be on the Pollyannaish side.

Although there is little hard evidence supporting the claims just described, empirical evidence certainly supports (albeit indirectly) the proposition that individuals regularly communicate their positive perceptions to their partners. For example, research has confirmed that more positively biased partner judgments are associated with both the perceiver and the target being more satisfied with the relationship (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a). Such findings suggest that perceivers' rose-tinted judgments are behaviorally conveyed and that their partners are attuned to these behaviors. In addition, there is evidence that people incorporate aspects of their partners' positively biased appraisals into their own self-perceptions over time (Murray et al. 1996b). This effect indicates that people are sensitive to how they are being evaluated by their partners and that they adjust perceptions of their own mate value accordingly. This finding is consistent with sociometer theory, which proposes that self-esteem represents a gauge that responds to feedback from other people about levels of interpersonal acceptance (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The extent to which such behaviors and cognitive processes are consciously accessible is debatable, but we believe that, in part, they are likely to be so.

Research on partner regulation further supports the idea that people typically communicate evaluative perceptions to their partners, which their partners duly become quite aware of. A recent study by Overall, Fletcher, and Simpson (2006) suggested that partner regulation attempts provide information to the recipients concerning how their partners view them along quite specific trait dimensions. This research found that individuals reported fre-

quently attempting to change their partners in domains that are central to mate evaluation. Regulation attempts by individuals influenced their partners in three independent ways: Partners who were the target of regulation attempts formed more negative self-perceptions, they became more consciously aware of how their partners actually viewed them, and they became more motivated to self-regulate on the same qualities. Moreover, these findings were not simply a function of overall affect or relationship evaluations but were specific to given trait dimensions.

Fourth, and finally, people's prior experiences in intimate relationships, and their observations of others' relationships, may give them some insight into relationship-related biases. Partner perceptions become more negatively biased when relationships deteriorate. Because most individuals will have experienced relationship failure, they are likely to have experienced their partner perceptions becoming more negatively biased in the latter stages of failed relationships. Consequently, individuals may well have some understanding of how (at least in the past) their intimate bonds may have colored their evaluations. They may have also observed positively biased partner perceptions in other happy couples and how such perceptions change when relationships fail.

In summary, there are sound theoretical and empirical grounds for postulating that lay models of love and happiness (both general and specific) in intimate relationships embody biased judgments and that the existence and extent of such bias may be (to some extent) consciously accessible. The overarching goal of this research was to test the hypothesis that individuals are aware of both their own and their partners' biases in the domain of partner evaluations. Accordingly, we advanced the following predictions. First, individuals would generally believe that happy, successful relationships are characterized by positively biased partner judgments. Second, individuals would generally believe that their own intimate relationships are characterized by positively biased partner judgments (i.e., that their own partner judgments are positively biased and that they are viewed by their partners in a positively biased fashion). Third, individuals' ratings of the extent to which their own intimate relationships are characterized by positive biases should reflect the actual levels of positive bias present in their relationships (from both self to partner and partner to self).

In addition to these core predictions about metaperceptions of bias, we assessed overall levels of actual bias and associations between relationship quality and actual bias. The aims of these analyses were to both replicate previous research and test some novel hypotheses about the effects of judgment type. We explicate these predictions next.

The Link Between Positive Bias and Perceived Relationship Quality: The Moderating Role of Judgment Type

As previously mentioned, extensive research shows that the more positively individuals view their partners (taking into account the target's self-perceptions), the more satisfied both perceivers and targets tend to be with the relationship (see Fletcher et al., 2006, for a review). Moreover, greater positive bias in partner judgments also predicts later increases in satisfaction, decreases in conflict and relationship-related doubts, and greater relationship stability (Murray et al., 1996b). This body of research supports Murray et al.'s (1996b) thesis that maintaining commitment in

relationships requires nagging doubts and uncertainties to be quashed (see Murray, 2005, for a review). One primary way this is accomplished is by individuals viewing partners in the best light possible—as more committed, more attractive, more sensitive, and so forth than they would be judged using more brutally realistic criteria. People who, in turn, maintain positive perceptions of how they are viewed by their partners are in a strong position to maintain high levels of self-esteem, trust, and ultimately relationship satisfaction (Murray, 2005).

In contrast to Murray's (2005) approach, Swann's (1990) self-verification theory proposes that successful relationships are built on authenticity and honesty; thus, people are motivated to believe that their partners understand and see them as they perceive themselves, warts and all (Swann, 1990). However, these two approaches are not necessarily contradictory. For example, recent research by Swann et al. (2002) suggests that although people desire self-verifying appraisals for many trait dimensions, on a trait that is highly relevant to dating relationships (physical attractiveness), individuals desire evaluations from their partners that exceed their self-perceived physical attractiveness. In a similar vein, Kenny and Acitelli (2001) reported that individuals in happier relationships assumed they were similar to their partners (a form of bias) to a greater extent for traits central to the relationship. Thus self-verification motives may be limited to low-relevance relationship judgments, whereas high-relevance relationship judgments may be predominately influenced by positivity goals.

Neff and Karney (2002a, 2002b) have postulated that the level of specificity of the judgment is also a key moderating factor in determining levels of overall bias. They reported that spouses' perceptions of their partners became more positively biased as a function of the increasing globality of the judgment. They argued, with some empirical support (Neff & Karney, 2005), that the recipe for success in intimate relationships is high levels of positive bias on global traits but high accuracy (and perhaps low bias) on specific traits. However, as Neff and Karney pointed out, globality is likely to be confounded with relationship relevance. For example, in the Neff and Karney (2002a) study, attractive, successful, and understanding were rated as global attributions, whereas patient, organized, athletic, and tidy were rated as specific attributions. The latter specific set of attributions, however, seems to be less relevant and central in terms of relationship satisfaction than the former global set of attributions. This potential confound is especially problematic given the evidence reported by Swann and colleagues (Gill & Swann, 2004; Swann et al., 2002) suggesting that relationship relevance may be a key factor in determining the associations between relationship quality and bias–accuracy.

In the current research, we assessed a range of judgments that varied in terms of both relationship relevance and specificity, and we used an independent sample to provide ratings of these items in terms of both characteristics. Thus, we included global, diffuse traits that are central to relationship and partner evaluations (e.g., warmth and trustworthiness), specific traits that are similarly highly relevant to relationship and partner evaluations (e.g., physical attractiveness and status), and global traits that are likely to be more peripheral to the relationship (e.g., extroversion and conscientiousness). Because intimate relationships are important in people's lives and individuals are highly motivated to maintain positive relationship evaluations, we predicted that relationship relevance would be the critical factor in determining overall levels

of actual bias. It also follows, for the same reasons, that relationship quality should be associated with positive bias to a greater extent for more relationship-relevant traits (controlling for specificity).

Research Overview

Across three studies, we examined individuals' perceptions of bias in their own and others' relationships. In addition, we tested the extent to which individuals desired positively biased evaluations from their partners, and we examined the links between actual bias, perceived bias, and relationship quality ratings. The overarching goal was to test the proposition that bias in intimate relationships is (in part) a conscious phenomenon.

Study 1 aimed to access individuals' stereotypes of good and bad intimate relationships in order to explore lay theories about the role of biased partner judgments in intimate relationships. This study tested the hypothesis that participants would assume happy relationships are characterized by positively biased partner judgments—that is, the belief that partners in happy relationships are likely to exaggerate each other's positive qualities and minimize each other's faults. In contrast, we predicted that individuals would believe that unhappy relationships are characterized by negatively biased partner judgments.

Study 2 measured individuals' desired and perceived bias in their own, current intimate relationships. We expected that individuals would want their partners to view them more positively than their real self. Moreover, we expected that individuals would report that they judged their partners in a positively biased fashion and were, in turn, judged by their partners in a positively biased fashion. For example, we expected that Jim would report that he perceived Charlotte more positively than Charlotte's real self and that Charlotte perceived Jim more positively than his real self. We also investigated the links between perceived bias and perceived relationship quality. The sample in this study included individuals only (not couples), and therefore, actual bias and its association with desired and perceived bias could not be assessed.

In Study 3, we repeated the same analyses as in Study 2, but with a sample of 57 couples. One new analysis in Study 3 involved the calculation of actual bias in partner judgments and comparisons between actual and perceived bias at the individual and relationship levels. We predicted that perceptions of greater positive bias would be associated with greater actual positive bias. The use of couple-level data in Study 3 allowed the examination of partner effects in addition to within-participant effects in all analyses. In some analyses, we predicted within-participant effects and in others we predicted partner effects. As previously mentioned, we predicted that Partner A's actual bias in judging Partner B would correlate with the extent to which Partner A perceived that they were positively biased in judging Partner B (a within-participant effect). We also predicted that Partner A's actual bias would correlate with the extent to which Partner B thought that Partner A was biased (a partner effect). Finally, we investigated the associations between overall actual bias and relationship quality. We predicted that relationship relevance would be the critical factor in determining whether overall positive bias would be found for particular types of judgments and whether levels of positive bias would be associated with relationship quality.

Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to examine normative beliefs about bias in partner judgments. Individuals read one of three vignettes depicting a fictional heterosexual couple in a very happy relationship, a moderately happy relationship, or an unhappy relationship. Participants then rated the extent to which the fictional partners were likely to be positively biased, negatively biased, or unbiased in their judgments of each other (compared with a realistic, unbiased standard). We expected that the very happy partners would be rated as positively biased, exaggerating each other's strengths and minimizing each other's faults. In contrast, we predicted that the unhappy partners would be perceived as negatively biased. Finally, we predicted that the moderately happy couple would be rated as slightly positively biased.

Method

Participants

Participants were 25 men and 25 women recruited through poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury. The mean age of participants was 23.26 years ($SD = 5.47$, range = 18–50). Of the sample, 64% reported that they were currently involved in an intimate relationship (dating, cohabiting, or married).

Stimulus Materials

Three paragraph-length vignettes were created to depict a couple in a very happy relationship, a moderately happy relationship, and an unhappy relationship. The very happy couple was portrayed as possessing very high levels of satisfaction, commitment, closeness, trust, and love. For example, the wording of the vignette representing the very happy relationship was as follows:

> Patrick and Suzy have been dating for 18 months. Patrick and Suzy are extremely happy with their relationship. They are committed to being together for the long term, their relationship is very close, and they trust each other completely. Patrick and Suzy love each other.

The moderately happy couple was depicted as possessing moderate levels of these qualities, and the unhappy relationship was portrayed as having low levels of the same qualities. These five characteristics make up key components of relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000b); thus manipulating them in vignette form should create variable impressions of relationship quality.

Measures

Manipulation check. To test whether we had successfully manipulated the perceived relationship quality of the fictional couple, we asked participants two questions about the fictional couple's relationship immediately after they read the vignette. First, participants were asked how satisfied they thought the couple was with their relationship on 7-point Likert scales (i.e., "How satisfied do you think Patrick and Suzy are with their relationship?" 1 = *extremely dissatisfied*, 7 = *extremely satisfied*). Second, participants were asked to estimate the probability that the fictional couple would still be together in 12 months.

Perceptions of bias in partner evaluations. Participants were asked to rate how realistic the fictional partners' evaluations of each other were likely to be. They were asked to provide one set of ratings for the man's evaluations of the woman and another set for the woman's judgments of the man. Participants were asked to separately consider five categories of evaluation. The first three dependent measures were chosen to reflect three judgmental domains that constitute centrally important partner judgments: warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources (Fletcher et al., 1999; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). The final two categories assessed general positive and negative qualities. The following example demonstrates the form of all the questions: "How realistic is Patrick likely to be in judging Suzy's warmth–trustworthiness?" The response options consisted of 7-point scales (1 = *greatly underestimates,* 4 = *is realistic* [*unbiased*], 7 = *greatly overestimates*).

Procedure

Participants were randomly allocated (within gender) to one of three conditions, which determined which of the three vignettes they read. Participants attended the laboratory in small groups. Upon arrival at the laboratory, they were given general information about the study and instructions for how to complete the scales. After consent was obtained, participants were seated at well-spaced, individual desks to read their assigned vignettes and complete the questionnaires. Upon completion of the study, participants deposited their questionnaires in a locked box, were thanked, and were paid NZ\$10 (~US\$7) for their participation.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Perceptions of relationship quality. Mean relationship quality ratings for each of the three conditions are displayed in Table 1. As

expected, the very happy couple was rated as the most satisfied, the unhappy couple was rated as the least satisfied, and the mean for the moderately happy couple fell in the middle. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that relationship quality ratings were significantly different across the three conditions, $F(2, 47) = 93.41$, $\eta_p^2 = .80$, $p < .01$.

Perceptions of the likelihood of the relationship remaining intact. The very happy couple was rated as the most likely to still be together in 12 months, the unhappy couple was rated as the least likely to still be together, and ratings for the moderately happy couple fell in between. A one-way ANOVA showed that relationship longevity ratings were significantly different across the three conditions, $F(2, 47) = 77.98$, $\eta_p^2 = .77$, $p < .01$. In summary, these results demonstrate that the vignettes were effective in conveying varying levels of relationship quality.

Did Perceptions of Bias Vary as a Function of Relationship Quality?

A series of 3 (relationship quality) × 2 (fictional men's and fictional women's judgments) ANOVAs, with the second factor as a repeated measure, were conducted for each of the five categories of evaluations. All five analyses revealed significant main effects for relationship quality level, $Fs(2, 47) = 11.34$–34.44, $\eta_p^2 s = .33$–$.59$, $ps < .01$, with mean ratings in the expected direction (see Table 1). In all five analyses, the very happy couple was rated as the most positively biased, the very unhappy couple was rated as the least positively biased, and ratings for the moderately happy couple were in the middle. There was one significant main effect for fictional men's and fictional women's judgments that occurred for ratings of attractiveness–vitality. This showed that fictional men were perceived as more positively biased than fictional women, $F(1, 47) = 14.65$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$, $p < .01$. Finally, there were no significant interaction effects. We recalculated these five analyses with the relationship status of participants (in a sexual rela-

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for All Scales (Study 1)

Variable	Very happy couple				Moderately happy couple				Unhappy couple			
	M	SD	t(16)	r^2	M	SD	t(16)	r^2	M	SD	t(15)	r^2
Relationship satisfaction	6.70	0.80			4.77	1.04			1.56	1.26		
Relationship longevity (%)	80.94	14.86			62.65	18.21			12.75	15.16		
Positive qualities												
Fictional man's bias	5.24	0.75	6.77**	.74	4.88	0.93	3.92**	.49	2.88	1.31	3.44**	.44
Fictional woman's bias	5.53	0.80	7.89**	.80	4.71	0.99	2.96**	.35	2.94	1.18	3.60**	.46
Negative qualities												
Fictional man's bias	3.23	1.09	2.89*	.34	3.59	0.94	1.08	.02	5.25	1.18	4.23**	.54
Fictional woman's bias	3.41	1.37	1.77	.16	3.76	1.20	0.81	.04	5.13	1.20	3.74**	.48
Warmth–trustworthiness												
Fictional man's bias	5.18	0.88	5.49**	.65	4.47	0.72	2.70*	.31	2.94	1.12	3.78**	.49
Fictional woman's bias	5.18	1.07	4.52**	.56	4.29	0.92	1.32	.10	2.56	1.46	3.94**	.51
Attractiveness–vitality												
Fictional man's bias	5.88	0.86	9.05**	.84	5.18	0.95	5.10**	.62	3.88	1.89	0.26	.00
Fictional woman's bias	5.18	1.19	4.09**	.51	4.47	1.07	1.82	.17	3.19	1.68	1.93	.20
Status–resources												
Fictional woman's bias	4.00	0.61	0.00	.00	3.88	1.11	0.44	.01	3.19	1.17	2.78*	.34
Fictional man's bias	4.71	1.16	2.51*	.28	4.18	0.73	1.00	.06	2.94	1.34	3.18**	.40

Note. The *t* values are for one-sample *t* tests comparing participants' ratings with 4 (unbiased appraisals). Effect sizes are calculated as r^2.
* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.

tionship vs. not in a sexual relationship) entered as a covariate. None of the results changed.

Next, we tested our predictions in a more focused way by conducting a series of one-sample t tests to examine whether ratings on the bias measures differed significantly from 4, the midpoint on the scales representing realistic, unbiased appraisals. Values significantly greater than 4 indicate positive bias and values significantly less than 4 indicate negative bias.[1] The means, standard deviations, and t values for each of the major variables are displayed in Table 1. The ratings for the very happy couple were significantly greater than 4 in 8 out of the 10 analyses. The ratings for the moderately happy couple indicated significant positive bias in 4 of the 10 analyses, and the remainder produced null findings. Finally, in 8 out of 10 analyses, the very unhappy couple were rated as significantly negatively biased—a mirror image of the results obtained for the very happy couple. This pattern of findings was consistent with our predictions.

Discussion

Consistent with expectations, this study showed that people possess a normative expectation that bias in partner judgments is linked to relationship quality. People thought that fictional partners in a very happy relationship would generally judge each other in an unrealistically positive fashion, meaning they would exaggerate each other's positive qualities and underestimate each other's faults. In contrast, participants associated poor relationship quality with negatively biased partner judgments and moderate relationship quality with either slightly positively biased or realistic (unbiased) partner judgments. The results were generally consistent regardless of whether male or female partner judgments were at issue. In Study 2, we addressed important questions about whether these findings extend beyond stereotypes and the extent to which people have insight into bias in partner judgments in their own intimate relationships.

Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to investigate perceptions of bias in partner judgments within people's own intimate (heterosexual) relationships, with a sample of individuals who were dating, cohabiting, or married. We expected that people would be aware of the tendency for partner judgments to be generally positively biased. However, this awareness could be revealed in two distinct ways. Charlotte could know that she views Jim in a positively biased fashion and could also independently realize that Jim views her in a positively biased way. We predicted that individuals would be aware of both kinds of bias. Thus, first, we expected that people would believe that their perceptions of their partners were more positive than their (perceived) partners' real self (a variable we termed *perceived self-bias—target partner*). Second, we predicted that people would believe that their partners judge them more positively than they judge to be warranted by their own real self (a variable we termed *perceived partner bias—target self*). In addition to measuring perceptions of bias, we assessed the extent to which individuals desired biased appraisals. On the basis of the evidence from Study 1 (showing that positively biased partner judgments are a normative expectation of intimate relationships) and in accordance with our prior arguments, we predicted that

individuals would actively desire appraisals from their partners that were more positive than their real selves.

As in Study 1, we tested our predictions using a broad range of judgmental domains that prior research has suggested are especially relevant to mate evaluation in relationship contexts: warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources (Fletcher et al., 1999). Note that these three domains vary in the extent to which they are subjective and internal versus objective and observable. Perceptions of warmth–trustworthiness are relatively subjective, internal, and ambiguous (e.g., kind, supportive, understanding). In contrast, perceptions of attractiveness–vitality and status–resources are more objective (e.g., nice body, nice house or apartment) and more closely tied to observable behavior (e.g., good lover, adventurous). It is quite possible that people may be less positively biased (or perhaps more accurate) in making more specific and objective judgments (consistent with Neff & Karney's, 2002b, argument). However, we expected that because these judgments are all highly relevant to intimate relationship settings, our findings would be consistent across these categories.

A second set of questions and predictions of this study concerned the association between perceived relationship quality and perceived bias. Greater positive bias in partner judgments could plausibly be either positively or negatively related to perceptions of relationship quality. Self-verification theory (see, e.g., Swann, Hixon, & de la Ronde, 1992) predicts that relationship quality will suffer if people perceive their partners (or themselves) to be positively biased, on the grounds that such biased perceptions will be interpreted as evidence that the relationship is built on an inauthentic and, consequently, unstable foundation. However, if individuals perceive positively biased partner judgments as a normative component of high quality intimate relationships (as suggested by the results of Study 1), then participants may perceive positively biased partner appraisals as a sign that their partners love them or vice versa. According to this logic, perceptions of positive bias in partner judgments may enhance perceptions of relationship quality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 51 men and 73 women currently involved in an intimate relationship. Of the sample, 88 were dating, 27 were living together, and 9 were married. The sample was recruited with poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury. The mean age of participants was 21.73 years ($SD = 5.36$, range $= 18–49$). The mean relationship length was 26.22 months ($SD = 35.82$, range $= 1–264$ months).

Measures and Psychometric Analyses

Three 17-item measures were constructed with the items from Fletcher et al.'s (1999) Partner Ideals Scales: warmth–trustworthiness (understanding, supportive, kind, good listener, sensitive, and considerate), attractiveness–vitality (sexy, nice

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[1] For ratings of negative qualities, scores above 4 represent negative bias, and scores below 4 represent positive bias.

body, attractive appearance, good lover, outgoing, and adventurous), and status–resources (successful, nice house, financially secure, dresses well, and good job). In this study and in previous research using college-age samples, the phrase *potential to achieve* was added to the items from the status–resources scale (e.g., financially secure [or potential to achieve]). Prior research has shown that these scales possess good internal reliability and validity (Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004).

The new scales measured (a) desired partner bias—target self ("How do I want my partner to perceive me in relation to my actual qualities?"), (b) perceived self-bias—target partner ("How do my perceptions of my partner compare to my partner's actual qualities?"), and (c) perceived partner bias—target self ("How do my partner's perceptions of me compare to my actual qualities?"). Further details about all these scales are provided below. Internal reliabilities for each scale, which were all acceptable, are shown in Table 2.

To show that the new scales were composed of the same three quasi-independent factors as the original Partner Ideals Scales, which in turn loaded on one higher order factor (Fletcher et al., 1999), we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). To reduce the complexity of the analyses, the scale items were combined for each set of measures to produce three observed variables for each mate evaluation domain. For each of the three scales used in this study, we tested and compared two models. The first model comprised the combined items loading on three first-order factors (representing the three key mate evaluation domains), which in turn loaded on one higher order factor. The second model was a one-factor model consisting of all items loading on a single factor. We predicted that Model 1 would produce a better fit than Model 2. For all three scales, Model 1 produced a reasonable fit, χ^2s(25, $N = 124$) = 57.67–68.33, ps < .001, comparative fit indexes (CFIs) = .91–.96, root-mean-square errors of approximation (RMSEAs) = .10–.14. In contrast, Model 2 demonstrated a consistently poor fit, χ^2s(27, $N = 124$) = 235.92–358.07, ps < .001, CFIs = .49–.66, RMSEAs = .28–.32. Note that Model 1 produced a significantly better fit than Model 2 in all cases,

$\Delta\chi^2$s(X, $N = 124$) = 174.07–289.74, ps < .001. These results suggest that the scales used in this study have the same factorial structure as the original Partner Ideals Scales.

Desired partner bias—target self. Participants were asked to rate how they would like to be viewed by their partners in relation to their own actual self on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *very inferior*, 7 = *very superior*). They were provided with an example that stated that they should circle 7 if they wanted their partners to see them as much sexier than they actually are, 4 for as sexy as they actually are, and 1 for much less sexy than they actually are. Mean scores were calculated for each dimension.

Perceived self-bias—target partner. Participants were asked to compare their perceptions of their partners with their partners' actual self on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *very inferior*, 7 = *very superior*). They were provided with an example that stated that they should circle 7 if they view their partner as much sexier than their partner's real self, 4 for as sexy as their partner's real self, and 1 for much less sexy than their partner's real self. Mean scores were calculated for each dimension.

Perceived partner bias—target self. Participants were asked to rate how they thought their partner's perceptions of them compared with their own actual self on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *very inferior*, 7 = *very superior*). They were provided with an example that stated that they should circle 7 if their partner views them as much sexier than they actually are, 4 for as sexy as they actually are, and 1 for much less sexy than they actually are. Mean scores were calculated for each dimension.

Relationship quality. The Perceived Relationship Quality Component Scale (Fletcher et al., 2000b) was used to measure relationship quality. This scale measures satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and romance (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Instructions were to rate the current partner and relationship on each item on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). All items were then averaged, with higher scores representing more positive perceptions of relationship quality. This scale has good internal reliability (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000a, 2000b) and has established good predictive validity (Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005).

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients for All Scales and t Values for Bias Scales (Study 2)

Variable	M	SD	α	$t(123)$	r^2
Desired partner bias—target self					
Warmth–trustworthiness	5.23	1.17	.95	11.75**	.53
Attractiveness–vitality	5.26	0.93	.89	15.13**	.65
Status–resources	4.97	1.10	.92	9.80**	.44
Perceived partner bias—target self					
Warmth–trustworthiness	4.41	0.92	.92	4.91**	.16
Attractiveness–vitality	4.86	0.72	.76	13.18**	.59
Status–resources	4.57	0.86	.87	7.40**	.31
Perceived self-bias—target partner					
Warmth–trustworthiness	4.54	0.86	.92	6.87**	.28
Attractiveness–vitality	4.95	0.91	.82	9.29**	.41
Status–resources	4.56	0.93	.89	5.38**	.19
Perceived relationship quality	5.83	0.84	.93		

Note. $N = 124$. The t values are for one-sample t tests comparing participants' ratings with 4 (unbiased appraisals). Effect sizes are calculated as r^2.
** $p < .01$.

Procedure

Participants attended the laboratory in small groups and were seated at well-spaced, individual desks to ensure privacy. They were given information about the study (in both written and verbal form) and instructions. They were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided and told they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Other questionnaires were also completed that are not reported here. When participants had completed the questionnaires, they deposited them into a locked box and were thanked and paid NZ$10 (~US$7).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

The means, standard deviations, and internal reliabilities for each of the measures are shown in Table 2. As is typical for samples of this kind, people were generally happy with their relationships. Nevertheless, all the variables we assessed produced reasonable levels of variance, and all exhibited good to excellent levels of internal reliability.[2] The measures of desired and perceived bias tended to be moderately correlated within domains (rs =.05–.40, $ps \leq$ .001–.59).

Did Participants Desire and Perceive Positively Biased Appraisals?

The means for the scales measuring desired bias were all significantly above 4, according to one-sample t tests (see Table 2). Recall that a score of 4 represents unbiased, realistic appraisals. Thus, as expected, participants wanted their partners to evaluate them in a positively biased fashion. These results were consistent across the three central domains of mate evaluation. The means for the scales measuring a) perceived partner bias–target self and b) perceived self-bias–target partner were also all significantly above 4 (see Table 2). Thus, on average, participants believed both that their own perceptions of their partners were positively biased (perceived self-bias—target partner) and that their partners judged them in positively biased fashion (perceived partner bias—target self). These results were also consistent across the three central domains of mate evaluation.

Associations Between the Bias Scales and Perceived Relationship Quality

The zero-order correlations measuring the associations between the bias scales and perceived relationship quality were nonsignificant with one exception. This exception revealed that people who reported more positive relationship quality thought they were more positively biased in judging partners' attractiveness–vitality ($r =$ .28, $p <$ .05). Overall, however, desired and perceived bias did not significantly vary as a function of perceived relationship quality.

Discussion

The results generally confirmed our predictions. In summary, people desired positively biased appraisals from their partners, thought their perceptions of their partners were overly positive in relation to their partners' real selves, and reported they were perceived in a positively biased fashion by their partners. These results are consistent with the findings of Study 1 in that both studies suggest that the existence of positively biased partner judgments constitute normative expectations in intimate relationships.

The findings of this study, however, require replication with another sample. Moreover, important questions remain about whether individuals' metaperceptions of bias reflect the actual levels of bias currently present in their own intimate relationships or whether they simply reflect normative expectations that partner judgments should typically be positively biased. These questions about whether perceptions of bias are accurate and the correlates of perceived and actual bias can be answered only by studying the judgments of both members of couples, which Study 3 does.

Study 3

The couple-level design used in this study allowed us to calculate each individual participant's level of (actual and perceived) bias and answer questions about associations between bias and other variables. We had four central aims in Study 3. First, we sought to replicate the findings from Study 2. Second, we asked the pivotal question of whether people's perceptions of bias within their own relationships are significantly accurate at the individual and relationship levels. Third, we investigated actual bias in partner judgments and made specific predictions about the types of partner judgments that would be positively biased. Fourth and finally, we investigated both within-participant and across-partner associations between actual and perceived bias and perceived relationship quality.

Replicating the Within-Participant Findings From Study 2

We expected to replicate the major findings from Study 2 showing that at the mean level, individuals (a) desired positively biased appraisals, (b) believed their own partner judgments were positively biased, and (c) believed their partners judged them in a positively biased fashion.

Associations Between Actual and Perceived Bias

Thus far we have shown that people expect that partner judgments will typically be positively biased. However, we do not know whether individuals can accurately assess the extent to which their own specific relationships are characterized by positively biased partner judgments. To investigate this question, we needed to go beyond mean-level analyses. The first step in this process was to create an idiographic measure of the extent to which each individual's partner judgments were biased, relative to levels of positive bias in the sample overall (the details are described below). Then we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the associations between actual and perceived bias. At the within-participant level, we predicted that people who actually were more positively biased would perceive themselves to be more positively biased. At the across-partner level, we predicted that

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[2] Copies of the complete correlational matrices for both Studies 2 and 3 are available from Alice D. Boyes.

people who actually were more positively biased would be rated by their partners as being more positively biased.

Actual Bias in Partner Judgments, the Moderating Role of Judgment Type, and Associations Between Actual Bias and Perceived Relationship Quality

In this study we measured a range of judgments that varied in terms of the extent to which the judgments were (a) relationship relevant and (b) global versus specific. We assessed actual bias for three diverse types of partner judgments (using targets' self-ratings as a benchmark standard): mate value judgments, Big Five personality judgments, and predictions of how likely self and partner were to leave the relationship. In general terms, we expected that the mate value judgments and dissolution predictions would be more relevant to relationships than the Big Five categories. At face value, however, the individual items measuring such constructs vary in terms of both globality and relationship relevance. For example, the mate value qualities assessed are all relationship relevant but vary from global (e.g., understanding) to specific and concrete (e.g., good body). Items used to assess the Big Five personality judgments also appear to vary in terms of both globality (responsible seems more general than polite) and also potential relevance to relationships (kind seems more relevant to relationships than talkative).

To test these hypotheses and our intuitions, we had an independent sample rate the globality and the relationship relevance of all the items used to measure these constructs and then used the resultant mean ratings to predict both the amounts of bias produced and the size of the association between bias and perceived relationship quality. On the basis of the centrality of intimate relationships and the motivation to retain positive relationship evaluations in ongoing relationships, we previously argued that relationship relevance should be the critical factor in determining whether overall positive bias exists. Thus, we expected that for judgments high in relationship relevance, (a) actual bias would be more marked and (b) positive bias would be more strongly correlated with more positive relationship quality (when controlling for judgment specificity).

We also assessed and controlled for levels of depression and self-esteem, when appropriate, to rule out explanations in terms of global evaluative tendencies. Finally, there is some prior evidence that women are more prone to biased judgments than are men (Gagne & Lydon, 2003). Thus, we tested for the same gender differences in the current study.

Method

Participants

Participants were 57 heterosexual couples currently in intimate relationships, recruited via poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury. The mean age of male participants was 24.82 years ($SD = 7.34$, range = 18–51), and the mean age of female participants was 23.37 years ($SD = 7.10$, range = 17–57). The mean relationship length was 27.26 months ($SD = 45.80$, range = 2–346). Of the sample, 8.8% were married (5 couples), 42.1% were unmarried but cohabiting (24 couples), and 49.1% were dating but not cohabiting (28 couples).

Measures

Both partners completed the same scales as described in Study 2. Details of these scales are reported in Study 2. Several additional sets of scales were also completed, as described below.

Mate value ratings. Participants separately rated their own and their partner's mate value on the same 17 items used in Study 2 (derived from Fletcher et al.'s, 1999, Partner Ideals Scales and measuring the critical domains of warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources). Participants were asked to rate each attribute in terms of how accurately each item described their partner on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *very inaccurate,* 7 = *very accurate*). Mean scores were calculated for each dimension, with higher scores reflecting more positive partner perceptions. The same procedure was used to derive a measure of self-perceptions.

Big Five personality ratings. Participants separately rated their own and their partner's personality on scales designed to measure the five domains that constitute the Big Five model of personality. There were three items for each domain: Extroversion (extrovert–introvert, assertive–unassertive, talkative–silent), Neuroticism (relaxed–tense, secure–insecure, guilt free–guilt ridden), Openness to Experience (intellectual–unintellectual, reflective–unreflective, imaginative–unimaginative), Conscientiousness (organized–disorganized, responsible–irresponsible, thorough–careless), and Agreeableness (kind–unkind, cooperative–uncooperative, polite–rude). Ratings were made on 7-point semantic differential scales. This scale was adapted from one developed by Fletcher, Grigg, and Bull (1988), which was based on prior factor analytic research. These scales achieved good reliability and replicated the Big Five factorial structure obtained in prior research (Fletcher et al., 1988; Thomas, 1999).

Predictions about commitment to the relationship. Participants were asked to rate how likely it was that they would end the relationship with their partner in the next 3 months, 12 months, and 5 years. They were asked to respond by writing a percentage in the space provided. Participants were also separately asked how likely it was that their partner would end the relationship across the same time frames; thus, a total of six questions were asked about the likelihood of the relationship being dissolved.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. This scale measures global feelings of self-worth (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"). Participants rated each item on 7-point Likert scales with anchors of 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). Negative items were reverse scored. All items within the scale were then averaged so that higher scores represent higher (more positive) self-esteem.

Depression. Depression was measured using the 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). This scale measures a comprehensive range of the cognitive (e.g., suicidal ideation), affective (e.g., sadness), and behavioral (e.g., sleeping difficulties) symptoms of depression. For each item, participants were instructed to select which of four statements best described how they had been feeling in the past week. Each statement carries a score from 0 to 3. Thus, the possible range of scores is 0–63, with higher scores indicating higher levels of depression.

Procedure

Couples came to the laboratory together and received the instructions together, then participants completed the questionnaires in separate rooms. Participants were assured that the study did not include any elements of deception and that their responses were strictly confidential. Other questionnaires were also administered that are not reported here. Each individual was paid NZ$20 (~US$13) for his or her participation.

Globality and Relationship-Relevant Ratings

To measure globality and relationship relevance, we had an independent sample of 10 men and 10 women rate each of the 32 items from the scales previously described (17 Partner Ideals items and 15 Big Five items). The order of the two sets of scales was reversed equally within each gender. The globality scale asked participants to rate the items in terms of how general (abstract) or how specific (concrete) each item was, using 7-point Likert scales (1 = *specific*, 7 = *general*). The relationship-relevance scales asked participants to rate the same items but in terms of how important or relevant each item would be in terms of what people generally look for in a mate (in a short-term or long-term sexual relationship). Again, 7-point Likert scales were used (1 = *unimportant*, 7 = *important*).

The data file containing the ratings described above was initially flipped so that the variables represented the 20 raters and the cases represented the items being rated. With this technique, the item-total correlations now represent the extent to which the raters agreed across the 32 items rated. One rater was dropped for the relationship-relevance ratings to produce good item-total correlations (.29 to .79) and a good overall Cronbach's alpha (.92). The globality ratings were less reliably rated, but when 5 raters were dropped (leaving 15 raters), the item-total correlations were adequate (.13 to .73), along with Cronbach's alpha (.73). Finally, mean ratings across the raters were calculated representing levels of globality and relationship relevance for each item. As we anticipated, replicating Neff and Karney (2002a), items that were rated as more global were also rated as more relevant to relationships (r = .44, p < .05).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

The means, standard deviations, and internal reliabilities for each of the measures are shown in Tables 3 and 4.[3] The findings were generally consistent with previous research (including Study 2). All the variables exhibited good to excellent levels of internal reliability. Individuals generally reported high levels of relationship quality and believed their relationships were likely to remain intact, especially in the short term. For men and women, ratings of how likely self was to end the relationship were similar to ratings of how likely the partner was to end the relationship. As in Study 2, the measures of desired and perceived bias tended to be slightly correlated within domains (for women, mean r = .25, with three out of nine correlations significant at the p < .05 level; for men, mean r = .15 with three out of nine correlations significant at the p < .05 level).

Did Participants Desire and Perceive Positively Biased Appraisals?

In the next series of analyses, we repeated the within-participant analyses of desired and perceived bias reported in Study 2. These analyses provide information about average levels of desired and perceived bias in the sample overall. A series of one-sample *t* tests (see Table 4) showed, as expected, that individuals tended to (a) desire positively biased appraisals, (b) believe their own partner judgments were positively biased, and (c) believe their partners judged them in a positively biased fashion. These results were consistent for men and women and across mate evaluation domains (warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources). These results replicate those of Study 2.

Across-Partner Analyses: Actual Bias

Targets' self-ratings served as a reality benchmark in these analyses. For example, male actual bias in judging their partners' warmth–trustworthiness was assessed with a dependent *t* test to compare men's mean ratings of their partners' warmth–trustworthiness with women's mean ratings of self-perceived warmth–trustworthiness. We calculated overall actual bias for three types of judgments: mate value judgments, Big Five personality judgments, and perceptions of how likely the partner was to end the relationship. These analyses were conducted separately for men and women. The results are reported in Table 5.

As predicted, partner perceptions of mate value were significantly positively biased. On average, both male and female participants overestimated their partners' warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources. However, consistent with our expectations, men's partner perceptions were not significantly biased for any of the Big Five traits. Women's partner perceptions were not significantly biased for three out of five Big Five judgments, but they perceived their partners as significantly more extroverted and less neurotic than their partners perceived themselves. Finally, against predictions, neither men nor women were significantly biased overall in predicting how likely their partners were to end the relationship, regardless of whether the next 3 months, 12 months, or 5 years were considered.

To analyze our predictions concerning globality and relationship relevance (in relation to bias) in a more fine-grained and powerful manner, we first calculated the equivalent means, as shown in Table 5, but for each item in each scale separately (a total of 32 items, 17 mate value items and 15 Big Five items). We then used a regression approach to analyze the best predictors of bias for men and women separately. For example, for the men, we treated the mean judgments that men made of their women partners (across the sample) as the dependent variable and regressed it simultaneously on four independent variables: the mean self-judgments of the women, the mean globality and relationship-relevance ratings (obtained from the independent sample as described previously), and finally the mean self-judgments of the men (to control for assumed similarity). Controlling for the mean self-judgments of the women (as an independent variable) means that the remaining independent variables now predict levels of positive bias (i.e., mean judgments of the partner that are

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[3] One female participant did not fill in the partner perceptions questionnaire; therefore data from this couple were excluded from analyses involving this questionnaire.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients (Study 3)

Variable	Men			Women		
	M	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α
Self-perceptions						
Mate value						
Warmth–trustworthiness	5.45	0.80	.81	5.56	0.53	.81
Attractiveness–vitality	4.14	0.71	.71	4.15	0.64	.66
Status–resources	5.06	1.32	.91	5.30	0.98	.79
Personality						
Extroversion	4.73	1.07	.68	5.01	1.08	.78
Neuroticism	2.14	1.25	.71	2.51	1.08	.65
Openness to Experience	5.64	0.79	.58	5.68	0.70	.47
Conscientiousness	4.96	1.12	.80	5.58	0.99	.76
Agreeableness	5.56	0.89	.67	5.77	0.90	.82
Self-esteem	5.27	1.09	.88	5.19	1.17	.91
Depression	9.45	5.74	.92	8.61	5.32	.92
Partner perceptions						
Mate value						
Warmth–trustworthiness	5.85	0.85	.81	5.77	0.87	.78
Attractiveness–vitality	4.70	0.60	.75	4.77	0.74	.72
Status–resources	5.70	0.89	.86	5.63	1.17	.89
Personality						
Extroversion	5.19	1.16	.76	5.14	1.10	.72
Neuroticism	2.51	1.13	.68	1.72	1.17	.76
Openness to Experience	5.56	0.81	.57	5.46	0.86	.64
Conscientiousness	5.69	1.02	.81	5.22	1.23	.82
Agreeableness	5.82	0.93	.81	5.84	0.83	.72
Relationship perceptions						
Perceived relationship quality	5.73	0.73	.90	6.02	0.65	.92
Perceptions of self's commitment to the relationship						
3 months	10.88	21.03		6.94	12.14	
12 months	18.96	27.67		18.35	24.05	
5 years	28.61	34.30		29.12	30.26	
Perceptions of partner's commitment to the relationship						
3 months	11.07	22.44		8.68	14.24	
12 months	17.21	24.76		20.11	24.69	
5 years	26.88	31.07		28.89	29.89	

Note. *N* = 57 couples. Ratings of the potential for the relationship to end are expressed as percentages. By convention, depression ratings are total Beck Depression Inventory scores.

relatively higher than the mean self-perceptions of the partner across the sample).

Consistent with predictions, controlling for globality and self-perceptions, items that were more relevant to relationships significantly predicted higher levels of positive bias for both men (β = .31, *p* < .05) and women (β = .61, *p* < .01). In contrast, the results showed that more global items were associated with lower levels of positive bias (β = −.32, *ns*, for the women, and β = −.41, *p* < .006, for the men).

Finally, we investigated gender differences in actual bias for mate value judgments using a series of 2 (bias: partner perceptions vs. partners' self-perceptions) × 2 (gender: male vs. female) ANOVAs with both variables as repeated measures. Separate analyses were conducted for warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources. In all three analyses, replicating the prior analyses,

there was a main effect for bias showing that partner perceptions were significantly more positive than partners' self-perceptions, *F*s(1, 55) = 11.66–64.67, η_p^2s = .18–.54, *p*s < .01. However, there were no significant interaction effects, which shows that there were no significant gender differences in actual bias.

In summary, these results show that the extent to which partner judgments were biased depended on the type of judgments at issue. Judgments of centrally important aspects of mate value were reliably positively biased, after controlling for the specificity of the judgments. Note that positive bias was found for judgments of relatively global and internal qualities (warmth–trustworthiness) and judgments based on more objective and observable attributes (attractiveness–vitality and status–resources). In contrast, judgments of Big Five personality characteristics and ratings of the partner's commitment to the relationship were generally unbiased. More specifically, we found when analyzing the

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability Coefficients, and t Tests for Bias Scales (Study 3)

Variable	Men					Women				
	M	*SD*	α	*t*(56)	*r*²	*M*	*SD*	α	*t*(56)	*r*²
Desired partner bias—target self										
Warmth–trustworthiness	4.77	0.88	.90	6.63**	.44	5.13	1.11	.95	7.66**	.51
Attractiveness–vitality	4.72	0.78	.88	6.98**	.47	5.34	0.87	.86	11.58**	.71
Status–resources	4.66	0.93	.92	5.38**	.34	4.95	0.98	.91	7.37**	.49
Perceived partner bias—target self										
Warmth–trustworthiness	4.12	0.98	.92	0.89	.01	4.33	0.96	.89	2.61*	.11
Attractiveness–vitality	4.74	0.76	.83	7.37**	.49	5.01	0.74	.79	10.32**	.66
Status–resources	4.33	0.93	.90	2.71**	.12	4.72	1.02	.87	5.32**	.34
Perceived self-bias—target partner										
Warmth–trustworthiness	4.40	0.94	.93	3.12**	.15	4.34	1.06	.91	2.45*	.10
Attractiveness–vitality	4.89	0.66	.68	10.20**	.65	4.99	0.81	.75	9.32**	.61
Status–resources	4.59	0.93	.88	4.83**	.29	4.79	1.03	.92	5.79**	.37

Note. *N* = 57 couples. The *t* values are for one-sample *t* tests comparing mean ratings with 4 (unbiased appraisals). Effect sizes are calculated as *r*².
* *p* < .05.   ** *p* < .01.

items across the scales independently that higher relationship relevance, and not more globality, predicted increased levels of bias.

Associations Between Perceived and Actual Bias for Mate Value Judgments

All of the analyses presented thus far have been mean-level analyses. Thus, they do not show whether perceptions of bias are anchored to actual bias at the individual and relationship levels. To produce an idiographic measure of actual bias, we regressed the men's partner perceptions on women's self-perceptions (and vice versa for women's actual bias) and saved the residuals. We carried this out separately for warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources. A positive residual indicates that the individual was relatively more positively biased (a score above the regression line of best fit for the whole sample), whereas a negative residual indicates that the individual was relatively less pos-

itively biased (a score below the regression line). Because the individuals in the sample overall are positively biased, a residual of zero would still indicate some positive bias.

SEM was then used to examine the associations between perceived and actual bias in mate value judgments. An SEM approach allows both within-participant effects and partner effects to be tested and controls for shared variance across the partners in specific variables (e.g., perceptions of bias). In each of the analyses gender differences between the paths were tested by setting the equivalent paths across gender as equal. Next, the Lagrange multiplier (LM) test was used to determine whether significant amounts of variance were explained if the constraints were released. All of the LM tests were nonsignificant, indicating the absence of significant gender differences between paths. Consequently, the within-participant and across-partner paths were pooled across gender. Paths that were pooled were set to equality at the unstandardized level; thus the standardized pool paths (shown

Table 5

Actual Bias in Partner Judgments (Study 3)

Judgment type	Male partner perceptions (*M*)	Female self-perceptions (*M*)	*t*(55)	*r*²	Female partner perceptions (*M*)	Male self-perceptions (*M*)	*t*(55)	*r*²
Mate value								
Warmth–trustworthiness	5.85	5.56	2.30*	.09	5.77	5.45	2.60*	.11
Attractiveness–vitality	4.70	4.15	4.88**	.30	4.77	4.14	5.82**	.38
Status–resources	5.70	5.30	2.39*	.09	5.63	5.06	3.11**	.15
Personality								
Extroversion	5.19	5.01	1.07	.02	5.14	4.73	3.29**	.16
Neuroticism	2.51	2.51	0.03	.00	1.72	2.14	2.50*	.10
Openness to Experience	5.56	5.68	1.06	.02	5.46	5.64	1.17	.02
Conscientiousness	5.69	5.58	0.81	.01	5.22	4.96	1.72	.05
Agreeableness	5.82	5.77	0.46	.00	5.84	5.56	2.00	.07
Commitment to the relationship								
3 months	11.07	6.94	1.85	.06	8.68	10.88	0.79	.01
12 months	17.21	18.35	0.63	.01	20.11	18.96	0.42	.00
5 years	26.88	29.12	0.73	.01	28.89	28.61	0.08	.00

Note. *N* = 57 couples. All analyses are across partners. Ratings of the potential for the relationship to end are expressed as percentages. Effect sizes are calculated as *r*².
* *p* < .05.   ** *p* < .01.

in Figures 1–4) may differ across gender. In all of the SEM analyses described below, perceived relationship quality, relationship length, self-esteem, and depression were (separately) controlled for to rule out artifacts or explanations in terms of positivity bias or simply positive evaluations of the relationship.

In the first series of analyses (see Figure 1), actual bias was entered into EQS structural equation modeling program (Bentler, 1995), as the independent variable, and the dependent variable was the degree to which individuals explicitly perceived their own judgments of their partners as positively biased (perceived self-bias—target partner). Separate analyses were conducted for each

mate value domain. Note that in these analyses, our predictions concern the within-participant paths. The across-partner paths are shown for completeness and to demonstrate discriminant validity. Consistent with predictions, the results show that both men and women achieved significant levels of accuracy in judging how biased their own partner perceptions were. Controlling for relationship quality ratings, relationship length, self-esteem, and depression (separately) did not change any of these results. This suggests that perceptions of bias in specific domains are not simply a function of overall evaluative positivity toward the self, partner, or relationship.
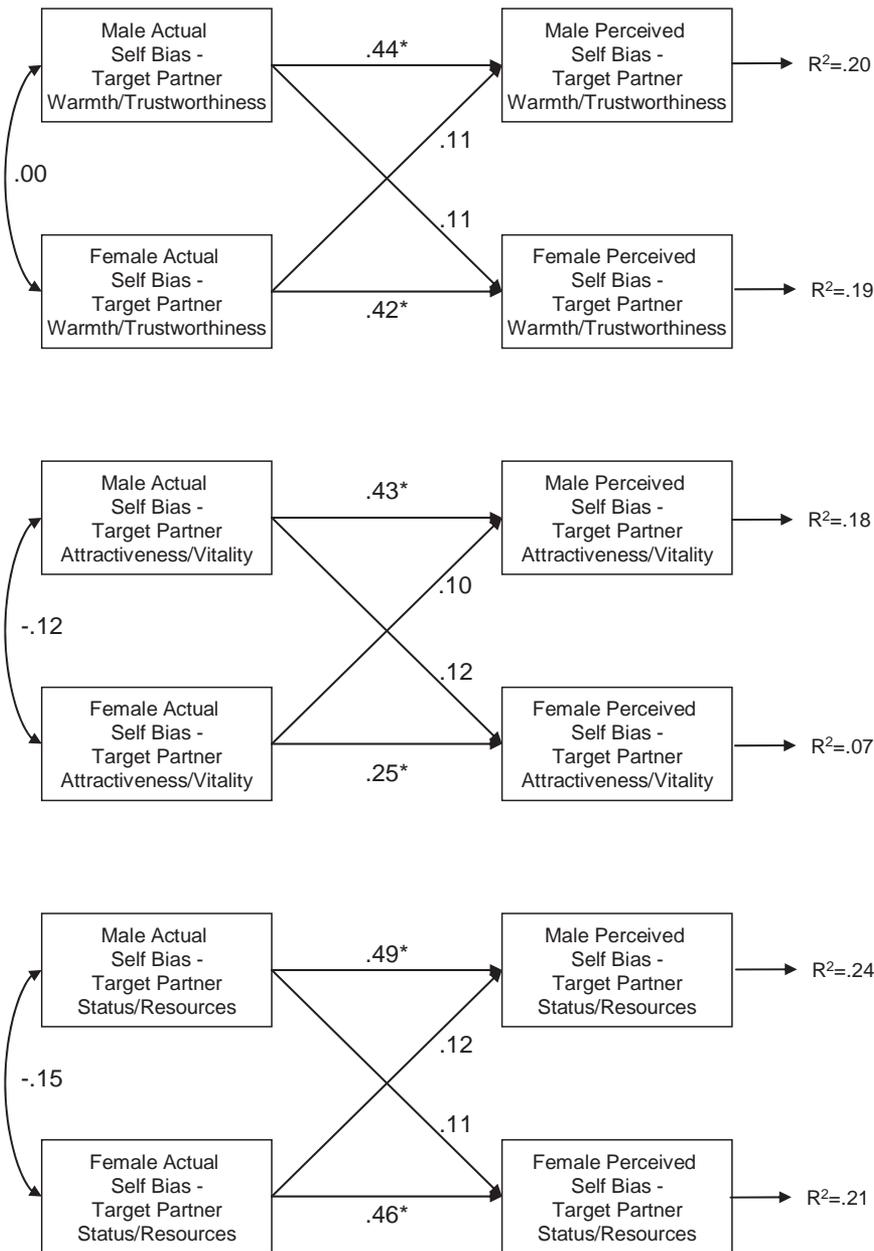

Figure 1. Associations between actual bias in partner judgments and perceived self-bias—target partner (Study 3). *p < .05.
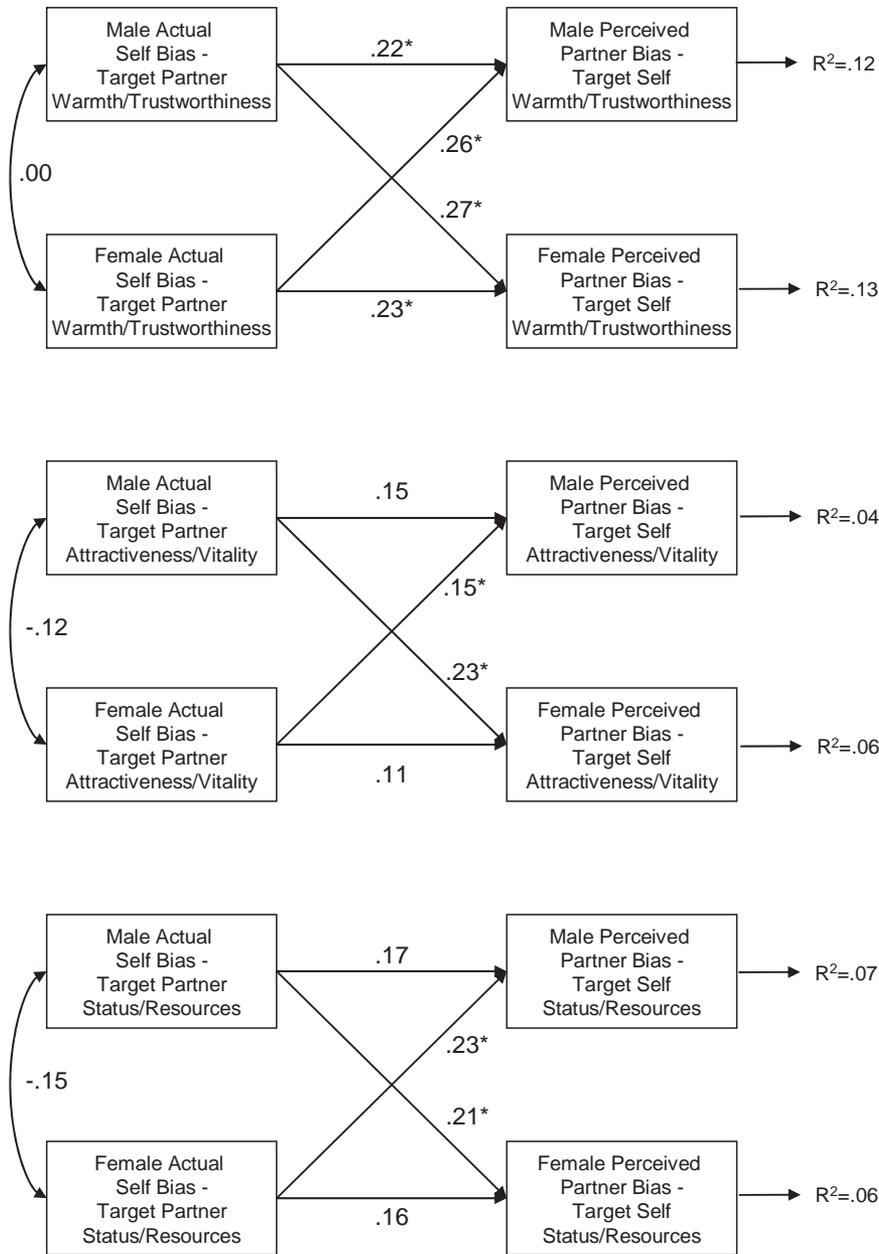
Figure 2. Associations between actual bias in partner judgments and perceived partner bias—target self (Study 3). *p < .05.

Next, we tested the associations between actual bias and perceived partner bias—target self (see Figure 2). Note that in these analyses the across-partner paths are the important paths. In this case, the within-participant paths are shown only for completeness. As expected, Figure 2 shows that people who actually were more positively biased were in turn perceived as significantly more positively biased by their partners, and these results were consistent across all three mate value domains. None of the results changed when perceived relationship quality, relationship length, self-esteem, and depression were (separately) controlled for. Again, these results critically show that this pattern of findings is not simply a function of overall evaluative positivity toward the self, partner, or relationship.[4]

In summary, these analyses show that perceptions of bias were anchored to actual levels of bias at the individual and relationship levels. People who were more positively biased in judging their

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[4] We also took up a reviewer's suggestion and analyzed the results using a regression approach designed to analyze change. For example, we regressed the man's partner judgments (on warmth–trustworthiness) on the man's perception of his bias in judging his female partner and the female partners' self-perceptions on the same dimensions. The results were generally similar to those reported here, which lend confidence to our approach using residuals and SEM (which we chose to use because of the additional advantages conferred by this technique described previously).

partners perceived themselves to be more biased and were perceived by their partners as more positively biased.

Associations Between Perceived Relationship Quality and Actual Bias

The zero-order correlations between actual bias and perceived relationship quality are shown in Table 6. The results generally supported our predictions. First, people who evaluated their relationships more positively were more positively biased in judging their partners' mate value across all of the central mate evaluation domains (warmth–trustworthiness, attractiveness–vitality, and status–resources). Second, people who were happier with their relationships were more likely to overestimate their partners' commitment to the relationship. Third, bias in personality judgments was not generally associated with relationship quality ratings, with several important exceptions. For both men and women, more positive relationship quality was associated with greater positive bias in judgments of Agreeableness, arguably the most relationship relevant of the Big Five dimensions. Women who were happier with their relationships were also more likely to underestimate their partners' Neuroticism (a dimension which is also relatively important in intimate relationship settings), and happier men were more positively biased in judging their partners' Openness to Experience (an unexpected finding).

To analyze our predictions concerning the moderating roles of globality and relationship relevance in a more fine-grained and powerful manner, we first calculated the same correlations as shown in Table 6 (for the within-participant correlations) but for each of the 32 items separately for both men and women (17 mate value items and 15 Big Five items). This variable ($n = 32$) represents the size of the positive association between perceived relationship quality and the amount of positive bias and was calculated separately across the sample of men and across the sample of women. This variable was then regressed onto the globality and relationship-relevance ratings (gathered from the independent sample as described previously), separately for men and women. Consistent with predictions, controlling for globality, higher relationship relevance significantly predicted stronger positive associations between perceived relationship quality and positive bias for both men ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$) and women ($\beta = .59$, $< .01$). In contrast, the globality of the ratings failed to predict the size of the associations between perceived relationship quality and positive bias for both men ($\beta = -.07$) and women ($\beta = .10$).

The prior correlational findings are, however, to some extent problematic because they do not control for shared variance across partners in actual bias. Thus, we used an SEM approach to examine in more detail the associations between actual bias and perceived relationship quality for judgments in the key mate value

Table 6
Correlations Between Perceived Relationship Quality and Bias (Study 3)

	Male perceived relationship quality		Female perceived relationship quality	
Variable	Within-participant correlations	Across-partner correlations	Within-participant correlations	Across-partner correlations
Actual bias				
Mate value				
Warmth–trustworthiness	.52**	.10	.30*	.16
Attractiveness–vitality	.57**	−.12	.40**	.01
Status–resources	.36*	−.10	.33*	.27*
Personality				
Extroversion	.18	.06	.18	.07
Neuroticism	−.19	−.02	−.30*	.03
Openness to Experience	.36**	−.01	.17	−.06
Conscientiousness	.09	−.10	.08	.09
Agreeableness	.38**	.15	.33*	.15
Commitment to the relationship				
3 months	−.49**	.04	−.21	−.04
12 months	−.35**	.08	−.28*	−.08
5 years	−.45**	.03	−.33*	−.11
Perceived self–bias—target partner				
Warmth–trustworthiness	.13	.03	.22	−.13
Attractiveness–vitality	.26	.03	.30*	.32*
Status/resources	.22	−.05	.27*	.26*
Perceived partner bias—target self				
Warmth–trustworthiness	.13	.09	.23	−.16
Attractiveness–vitality	.14	.15	.12	−.02
Status–resources	.13	−.04	−.01	.04

Note. $N = 57$ couples. Within-participant correlations are, for example, the correlation between male perceived relationship quality and male bias in judging the female partner's warmth–trustworthiness. Across-partner correlations are, for example, the correlation between male perceived relationship quality and female bias in judging the male partner's warmth–trustworthiness.
* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.

domains. Three analyses were performed, one for each mate evaluation domain. These analyses require a causal direction to be specified. We entered actual bias as the independent variable and relationship quality ratings as the dependent variable. Once again, the LM test was used to determine whether equivalent paths should be pooled across gender. Only one of the LM tests was significant, and the relevant paths were left unpooled (the partner paths for status–resources). All other pairs of paths were left as pooled.

As shown in Figure 3, both the male and female within-participant paths were positive and significant in all of the analyses. As expected (replicating the zero-order correlations), greater actual positive bias was associated with more positive perceptions of relationship quality across all three mate value domains. There was one significant partner effect showing that women were more satisfied the more positively

biased their male partners were in judging their potential to achieve status–resources. Separately controlling for relationship length, self-esteem, and depression, again, did not change any of these results. In summary, these results show that people who were happier with their relationships made more positively biased judgments of their partners, but to a greater extent for judgments that were high in relevance to the evaluation of the partner and relationship.

Associations Between Perceived Relationship Quality and Perceived Self-Bias—Target Partner

The zero-order correlations between perceived self-bias—target partner and relationship quality ratings are shown in Table 6. The
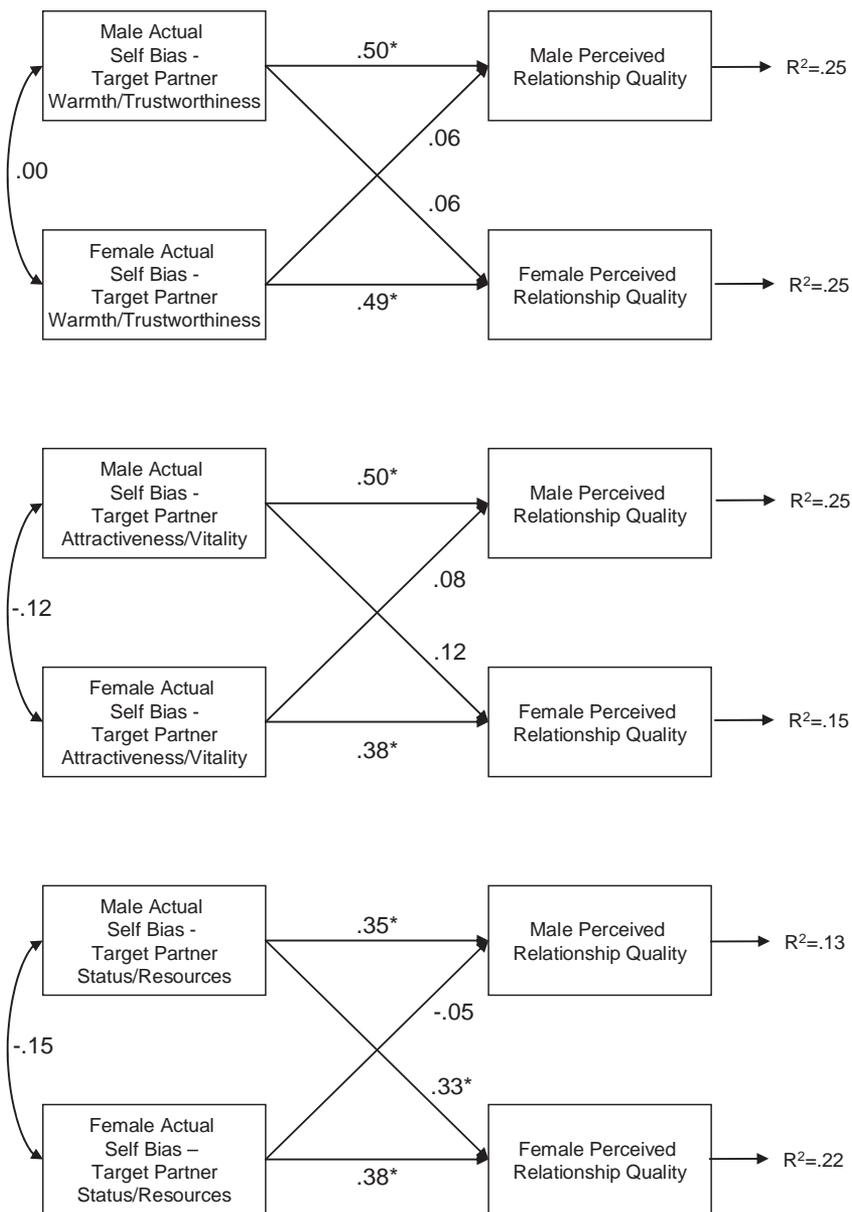

Figure 3. Associations between actual bias in partner judgments and relationship quality ratings (Study 3). *$p < .05$.

results were generally weaker than for actual bias. However, 4 of the 12 correlations were statistically significant. These findings showed that when men or women perceived themselves as more biased in judging their partners' attractiveness–vitality or status–resources, women tended to be more satisfied with the relationship. An identical set of SEM analyses to those described in the preceding section on actual bias was conducted to further examine the associations between perceived self-bias—target partner and relationship quality. Once again, three analyses were performed, one for each mate evaluation domain. Perceived bias was entered as the independent variable and relationship quality ratings as the dependent variable. Also as before,

the LM test was used to determine whether equivalent paths should be pooled across gender. None of the LM tests were significant, so all pairs of paths were left as pooled.

The results showed that for all three domains, people who perceived themselves as more positively biased were more satisfied with their relationships (see Figure 4). There were no significant partner effects. Separately controlling for relationship length, self-esteem, and depression again did not change any of these results with one exception (the within-participant paths in the analysis of warmth–trustworthiness became nonsignificant when relationship length was controlled for).
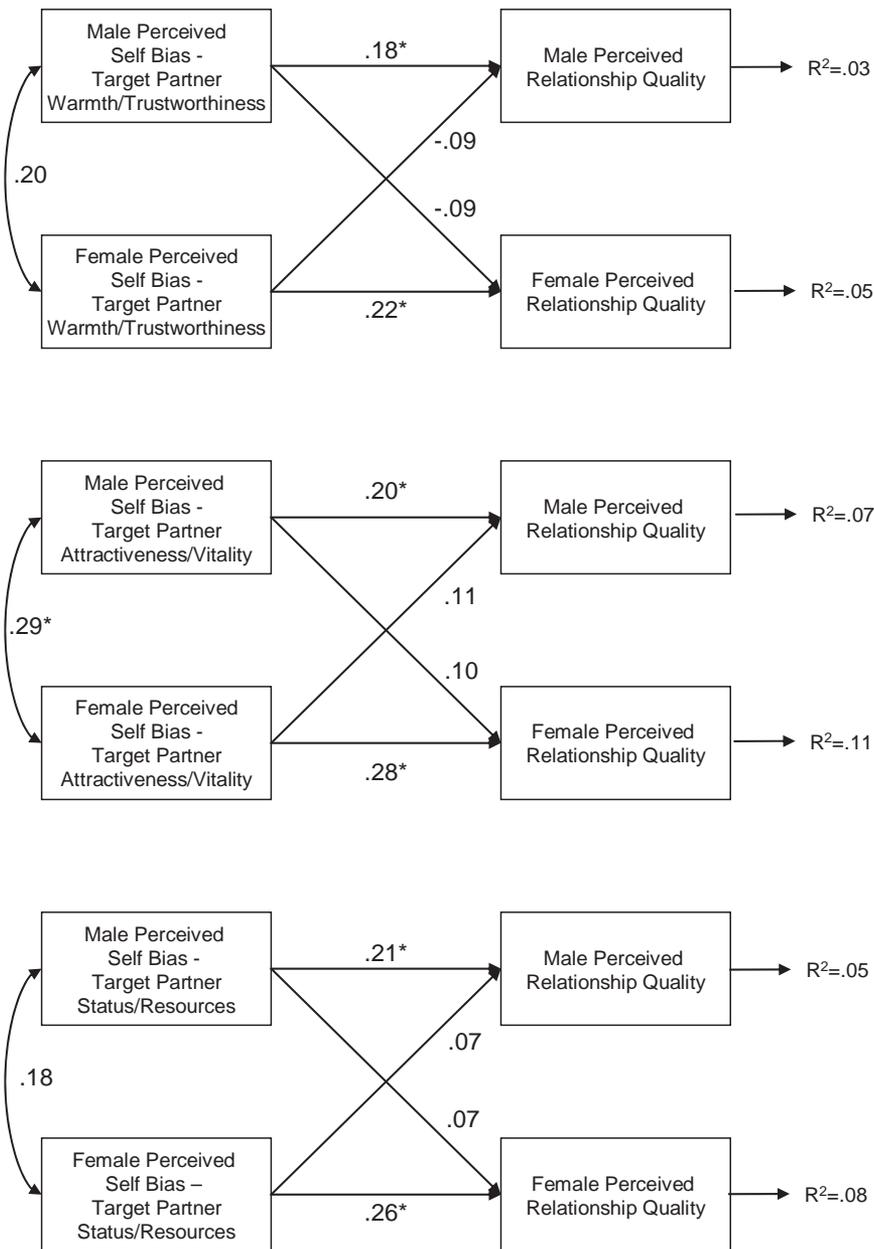

Figure 4. Associations between perceived self-bias—target partner and relationship quality ratings (Study 3).
*p < .05.

Associations Between Perceived Relationship Quality and Perceived Partner Bias—Target Self

The zero-order correlations between perceived partner bias—target self and relationship quality ratings are shown in Table 6. There were no significant findings. SEM analyses, identical to those conducted for perceived self-bias—target partner, revealed only one significant path. This path showed that women who were more satisfied with their relationships had male partners who perceived the woman as more positively biased in judging the man's potential to achieve status–resources. When relationship length, self-esteem, and depression were separately controlled for, this path remained significant and no other paths became significant.

Accuracy of Judgments: Self–Other Agreement

We correlated all the partner judgments produced with the relevant self-perceptions of the target partners for mate value judgments, Big Five personality judgments, and predictions for leaving the relationship. These accuracy correlations were generally positive and significant for both men (8 out of 11 significant at the $p < .05$ level, mean $r = .39$) and women (9 out of 11 significant at the $p < .05$ level, mean $r = .42$). Moreover, the significant correlations were unchanged when we controlled for the judge's self-perceptions on the relevant domains, which rules out explanations for accuracy simply in terms of individuals assuming similarity between self and partner on specific traits.

Discussion

Replicating the findings from Study 2, people desired positively biased appraisals, perceived that judgments of their partners were more positive than their partners' real self, and thought that they were, in turn, perceived in a positively biased fashion by their partners. However, this study extended the prior work by showing that individuals possessed insight into the extent to which their particular relationships were characterized by biased judgments both in terms of how self judges partner and also in terms of how partner judges self (a complex and inherently interpersonal cognitive task). Taken together with the prior results, these findings provide evidence that people are, in part, consciously aware of judgmental biases present in intimate relationships.

The results also show that with the exception of the commitment ratings, which we discuss further in the General Discussion, judgments that were more relevant to intimate relationship settings (e.g., mate evaluation categories like warmth or attractiveness) were more positively biased overall. Moreover, for highly relevant judgments, more positive bias was associated with more positive relationship quality ratings for both men and women. Both these findings were produced after controlling for the globality of the items used. In contrast, when controlling for relationship relevance, we found no evidence that higher levels of globality were associated with higher levels of positive bias.

General Discussion

We discuss our findings in terms of four major questions: (a) Do people want or expect the unvarnished truth from their partners? (b) Do people know how biased they are in judging their intimate partners? (c) Does the presence of positive bias in relationships lead to happiness? (d) What is the link between bias and accuracy in relationship judgments? We then discuss some caveats and draw our final conclusions.

Do People Want or Expect the Unvarnished Truth From Their Intimate Partners?

Taken together, these three studies provide convincing evidence that people expect that their partner judgments (at least those central to mate evaluation) will be positively biased in well-functioning intimate relationships. In Study 1, participants believed that, in happy relationships, individuals would generally exhibit positively biased judgments. In Studies 2 and 3, individuals wanted their own, current intimate partners to perceive them in a positively biased way and also reported that they actually judged their partners (and their partners judged them) in the same rose-tinted fashion. Apparently people are quite consciously aware of the endemic nature of positive judgmental biases in both their own and other people's relationships, and, indeed, they welcome the presence of such biases (at least to some extent).

At first blush these findings seem to be inconsistent with research on the *bias blind spot* (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002), showing that individuals have a tendency to report that they are less vulnerable to judgmental biases than they perceive other people are to the same biases. However, evidence for the bias blind spot typically derives from comparing individuals' perceptions of their own biases to their perceptions of strangers' biases, and the related research has investigated broad classes of social–cognitive biases rather than specific judgments of specific others.

Although substantial research has shown that self-serving biases are pervasive in many contexts, the current research adds to the growing evidence that intimate partner judgments constitute an important exception to the tendency for people to judge themselves more favorably than other people. Intimate relationships function as highly cohesive ingroups in which favorable judgments of the partner reflect well on self because self and partner are intrinsically linked (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

Do People Know How Biased They Are in Judging Their Intimate Partners?

The short answer is yes. Participants in this research were quite accurate in judging the extent to which their own partner perceptions were positively biased and the extent to which they were perceived in a positively biased way by their partners. These findings provide the most compelling evidence to date that individuals are (in part) consciously aware of bias in intimate partner judgments. Furthermore, people's insight into the extent to which they are judged in a positively biased fashion by their partners provides a particularly persuasive demonstration of the interpersonal nature of bias. For this finding to have emerged, partner judgments must have been behaviorally conveyed to the target partner, and the target must have been sensitive to this information.

Note that these effects were also robust; controlling for relationship quality, relationship length, self-esteem, and depression 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 but rather was based on assessments of specific traits. An important task remaining for future research is to investigate the processes involved in how (biased) partner perceptions are conveyed to the target partner.

That people realize their partners' perceptions are biased seems both plausible and relatively unproblematic theoretically. However, we also found (as expected) that people believed (correctly) that their own perceptions of their partners tended to be positively biased, and this may seem counterintuitive to some. If people are aware of such biases, then why don't they adjust for them when asked to straightforwardly rate their partners' qualities? Shakespeare wrestled with this conundrum in *Sonnet 138*, quoted from at the outset of the article, wondering how people were able to suppress simple but unpalatable truths in intimate relationships. His answer was that people are habitually motivated by intimacy and love to view their partners in a flattering fashion, even though they are aware (at some level) that such biased views may be discrepant from a harsher reality.

Shakespeare's suggestions and our findings are consistent with recent arguments by Kurzban and Aktipis (2006), derived from an evolutionary modular approach to the mind, that judgments designed purely for accuracy might be walled off from judgments designed for other purposes (such as negotiation or persuasion). A similar explanation, suggested by Gagne and Lydon's (2004) recent work, is that different question formats or tasks (as exemplified in the current research) can motivate people to adopt either an accuracy mental set or a feel-good orientation, thus leading to responses that appear to be discordant. Our hunch is that such explanations are pointing in the right direction and that people both can and do hold views about the qualities of self or partner that are regularly accessed and used in everyday settings but that may be viewed by the very same individuals as biased when in a more reflective and realistic frame of mind (as the bard suggested).

Does the Presence of Bias in Relationships Lead to Happiness?

In general terms, there was considerable evidence (confirming prior research) that more positive bias is associated with higher levels of relationship quality. However, this generalization is subject to some important qualifications. This research showed that not all partner judgments are positively biased overall but primarily those that are most relevant to intimate relationship contexts. Notably, for example, by assessing Big Five personality judgments, we showed that positive bias in relationship contexts is not a blanket evaluative predisposition that permeates any kind of partner judgment. Our findings also provide evidence that positive bias in partner judgments is mainly associated with relationship quality for judgments that are important in intimate relationship contexts. A skeptic might argue that if people with more positive self-perceptions tended to view their partners and relationships more optimistically across the board, then this could have accounted for the within-participant association between more positive relationship quality and greater positive bias in partner judgments. However, controlling for self-esteem and depression did not change the results, indicating that our results were not simply a manifestation of how positively individuals evaluated themselves in some general sense.

Against expectations, there was no evidence of overall bias in individuals' judgments of how likely their partners were to end the relationship (although greater positive bias in these judgments was, as expected, associated with more positive relationship quality ratings). Error management theory (Haselton & Buss, 2000) may offer an explanation for these null findings. Although prior research has typically found that partner judgments are positively biased overall, several recent studies have found evidence of negative bias (Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005; Haselton & Buss, 2000). Haselton and Nettle (2006) have argued that whether partner judgments will be positively biased, negatively biased, or unbiased overall can be predicted by considering the relative benefits and costs associated with positively versus negatively biased appraisals for specific types of judgments. Perhaps the obvious potential costs of overestimating a partner's commitment counterbalance the benefits of enjoying a sense of security that may not be warranted by relationship reality. Such speculations deserve empirical investigation.

Perceived bias was less strongly related to relationship quality ratings than actual bias and was confined to people's perceptions of how positively biased they were in judging their partners. However, the four significant zero-order correlations (and seven significant paths in the SEM analyses) found in Study 3 were in the same direction as our results for actual bias; greater perceived positive bias was associated with more positive relationship quality. Our initial theorizing was that the association between relationship quality and perceived bias could be either positive or negative because two opposing processes could influence this association. To recap, from the perspective of self-verification theory (Swann et al., 1992), individuals are likely to interpret biased perceptions as evidence that their partners may not understand their true self and presumably relationship quality may suffer. On the other hand, if individuals perceive positively biased partner judgments as a normative component of high-quality intimate relationships (as suggested by the results of Study 1), then this may lead people to view positively biased partner appraisals as a sign of love, and this should benefit relationship quality. Perhaps the mixture of positive and null findings obtained across Studies 2 and 3 are a function of both these processes sometimes canceling each other out. This hypothesis needs to be tested in future research. Still, the findings taken together suggest that realistic appraisals of positive bias in central relationship judgments do not undermine but, if anything, enhance love.

Bias Versus Accuracy?

Bias findings, like those found in this research, have typically been interpreted as evidence that people in happy intimate relationships are adrift from reality and that intrapsychic processes are perhaps more influential in intimate relationships than the interpersonal reality shared by the partners. Although significant accuracy effects are often reported in research focused on bias, they tend to be downplayed. The current research found evidence of overall positive bias and links between bias and relationship quality (for high-relevance judgments). However, metaperceptions of bias were also moderately accurate. Thus, these findings support the proposition that both positivity and truth-seeking motives may operate in intimate relationship settings and that these motivational stances can produce judgments that are both positively biased and

accurate (Fletcher et al., 2006; Gagne & Lydon, 2004). Once again, these findings suggest that findings of bias should not automatically be interpreted as showing that people in intimate relationships are out of touch with reality. In short, positive bias and accuracy can happily coexist in relationship settings.

Caveats and Conclusions

Several limitations should be considered in interpreting the results of this research. First, the participants were predominately young and unmarried; thus, the generalizability of these findings to older, married couples and to other cultural contexts cannot be assumed. Second, the evidence remains correlational. Experimental designs that systematically manipulate relationship relevance and globality versus specificity are needed to further clarify the role of judgment type. Third, although we found a mixed pattern of positive and null associations between perceived bias and relationship quality at the cross-sectional level, longitudinal research is needed for a fuller understanding of the effects of perceived bias (and the effects of accuracy in metaperceptions of bias) on relationship quality at different stages of relationship development (see, e.g., Neff and Karney, 2005). We failed to replicate prior research that gender moderated the amount of bias in relationship settings (see Gagne and Lydon, 2003). More generally, however, a valuable direction for further research would be to further examine variables that might moderate both amounts of bias and the links between bias and perceived relationship quality.

As noted previously, bias in relationship judgments may be driven by many different psychological processes. We do not claim that the findings from this research will generalize to every kind of judgment or underlying process. Indeed, it is unlikely that people will have introspective access to the intrapsychic processes involved in producing, say, positively biased memories of their partners' behavior. To use another example, people may be quite unaware of the extent to which their attachment working models automatically influence their perceptions of current relationships. Our tentative suggestion is that lay meta-awareness, and associated accuracy, in judgments of bias in relationship settings will be enhanced by two criterial features, both found in the current research. First, the existence of an accessible and relevant folk theory or belief (e.g., "love is blind") should help individuals to be sensitive 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.

Despite the extensive literature on bias and accuracy in intimate relationship settings, there are relatively few points of consensus, and interpretational debates are endemic. This research exemplifies the point that understanding judgmental biases and accuracy in interpersonal contexts requires the examination of psychological processes that operate both in an intrapsychic fashion and in terms of dyadic interpersonal processes. More specifically, the current research contributes to our understanding of bias and accuracy in intimate relationship settings in two major ways. First, the results challenge previously untested but pervasive assumptions about the intrapsychic and unconscious nature of biased partner judgments and show that some judgmental biases in relationship settings can be recast as both (in part) conscious and inherently interpersonal.

Second, the results suggest that partner judgments central to mate evaluation (but not low-relevance partner judgments) tend to be positively biased, independent of whether the judgments are global or specific.

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