A Test of Positive Illusions Versus Shared Reality Models of Relationship Satisfaction Among Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples

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According to the positive illusions model (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a), people in romantic relationships are more satisfied when they view their partners more favorably than the partners see themselves. By contrast, shared reality theory (Hardin & Conley, 2001) emphasizes the benefits of perceiving a partner as the partner sees himself or herself. We analyzed archived data from the American Couples Study (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) to test the applicability of the positive illusions model to gay and lesbian relationships. Structural equation models demonstrated that the positive illusions model effectively explains relationships among lesbian, gay, heterosexual cohabitating, and married couples.

What leads people to be happy in their primary romantic relationship? Do these processes differ for opposite-sex versus same-sex couples? Studies of heterosexual couples by Murray and colleagues (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a) have emphasized the value of positive illusions: People are happier when they idealize their partners and view the partner more positively than the partner views himself or herself. Other research has suggested that it is more important to have a partner who sees you as you really are (e.g., Hardin & Conley, 2001; Swann, de La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). The present research provides the first empirical application of either the positive illusions or shared reality models to both same-sex and opposite-sex romantic couples.

Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships

Previous research has demonstrated that heterosexual people are happier in relationships if they see their partners more favorably than the partners see

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themselves. According to the positive illusions model proposed by Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996a, 1996b), this idealization process happens in two ways. First, people project their images of themselves (which are known to be overly and erroneously positive; Taylor & Brown, 1988) onto their partners. Second, people project their ideal image of a relationship partner (i.e., their image of a perfect relationship partner) onto their current partners, which leads to enhancement of the partner's positive traits.

Murray et al. (1996a) demonstrated that perceptions of ideal relationships mediate the association between enhanced self-perceptions and an individual's perception of her or his relationship partner. In sum, people view partners more positively to the extent that they project the image of an ideal relationship partner onto their own romantic partners. Murray et al. found that these overly positive perceptions of romantic partners lead to heightened satisfaction in close romantic relationships.

According to Murray et al. (1996a), the bottom line for these idealization processes is that "Intimates should simply be happier to the extent that they see one another in a positive, idealized light," (p. 90). For example, a wife will be more satisfied in her marriage if her perceptions of her husband's characteristics are more positive than the husband's self-perceptions (Murray et al., 1996a).

Thus far, empirical support for the benefits of positive illusions has come from research on heterosexual dating and married couples. Among these samples, viewing the partner more positively than the partner sees himself or herself predicted both relationship satisfaction for each partner (Murray et al., 1996a) and more enduring relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1997). These findings have been replicated conceptually in Japan (Tomaya, 2002) and among a cross-cultural sample of Asian Canadian, European Canadian, and Japanese college students (Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000). Therefore, this model appears to have broad support in a wide range of heterosexual samples.

Shared Reality Theory

Shared reality theory makes predictions that diverge sharply from those made by positive illusions theory. Specifically, shared reality theory postulates that interpersonal relationships are established and maintained to the degree that relationship partners share beliefs or experiences (Hardin & Conley, 2001). Therefore, a relationship would not continue if the relationship partners were not able to create at least some minimal agreement or consensus between them. For example, a conversation in which one person fails to convey that she or he understands what the other person is saying will

stop very quickly. As another example, feminist consciousness-raising sessions in the 1970s strengthened women's relationships with other women by giving them a chance to discuss shared experiences and beliefs (Hardin & Conley, 2001). According to shared reality, relationships are stronger to the extent that they involve more consensus, agreement, and shared perspective. A small but increasing body of literature supports the shared-reality perspective as it pertains to interpersonal relationships (see Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005; Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006; Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005).

Shared reality theory predicts that people should be more satisfied in relationships in which they have a great deal of shared understanding with their partners, including mutual shared beliefs about the traits and qualities of both partners in the relationship. That is, there should be more satisfaction in relationships in which both people agree with one another about their personal traits. To put it another way, there should be more satisfaction in relationships in which members of the couple have more shared reality.

Testing Theoretical Models in Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Although researchers have not previously examined positive illusions or shared reality models in gay or lesbian relationships, there are several reasons for doing so. First, extending models developed specifically for heterosexual couples to gay and lesbian couples would provide evidence for the generalizability of these concepts. Second, one model might more effectively predict satisfaction in gay samples versus heterosexual samples.

To address the second possibility, it is important to consider the social context of lesbians' and gay men's experiences. The relationships of gay men and lesbians coexist with anti-gay prejudice and discrimination (Peplau & Beals, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Because of this stigmatization, lesbians and gay men sometimes conceal their sexual orientation and the true nature of their romantic relationships to avoid social rejection and discrimination. In a recent study of lesbians and gay men living in the relatively tolerant environment of Los Angeles, participants had disclosed their sexual orientation to only 60% of people in their social networks (Beals & Peplau, in press). It is not uncommon for lesbians and gay men to lie about their romantic relationships, indicating that they are single, even if they have been in a relationship for many years. Youths (Plummer, 1989) and adults (Caron & Ulin, 1997) may refer to their relationship partners as a "roommate" or a "friend," rather than a "lover" or "life partner."

We do not know how the pressures of concealment affect gay and lesbian couples. One possibility is that the lack of clear public validation for gay and

lesbian relationships may increase the need to have a partner who verifies one's self-conception (i.e., a partner with whom you have a shared reality about the type of person you are). This idea is supported by research on social support by Wayment and Peplau (1995), who found that reassurance of worth was a stronger predictor of well-being for lesbians than for heterosexual women.

The current research extends this finding to the context of close romantic relationships. Based on Wayment and Peplau's (1995) research, relationship satisfaction for lesbians and gay men may depend more on accuracy and authenticity, rather than on positivity. Such a finding would be consistent with shared reality theory (e.g., Hardin & Conley, 2001; Swann et al., 1994), which proposes that people will be more satisfied with their relationships when they view their partners as the partners see themselves. The possibility that shared beliefs are a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction in gay/lesbian relationships than in heterosexual ones has not been previously examined.

Alternatively, the relationship processes of lesbian and gay individuals may diverge from those of heterosexuals in a different way. Specifically, gay men and lesbians may have a stronger need for positive illusions than heterosexual people because they face more stigmatization than do heterosexual people. With so many people perceiving them negatively, gay and lesbian individuals might derive particular benefits from a partner who perceives them especially positively. This possibility can also be tested in the current research. Thus, the current project allows us to test two possible ways in which lesbian and gay relationships may diverge from heterosexual relationships.

The Current Research

The current project tested both the positive illusions and shared reality models of relationship satisfaction using secondary analyses of the American Couples Study (ACS; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). The ACS database offers several benefits. First, it includes unusually large samples of gay, lesbian, married heterosexual, and cohabitating heterosexual couples, thus permitting us to conduct separate analyses for each type of couple.

Although the data are older, we are testing general models of relationship satisfaction, which, if veridical, should hold up over different time periods. There is no reason to suspect that basic relationship processes leading to relationship satisfaction were different in 1978 than they are today. Moreover, societal opprobrium toward lesbians and gay men in 1978 was particularly strong. Therefore, this sample provides an especially appropriate test of

the possibility that societal stigmatization could engender different relationship satisfaction processes among lesbian and gay male (vs. heterosexual) couples.

Method

Procedure

The current study involves secondary analyses of data collected by sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) as part of the ACS. Cohabitating gay and lesbian couples, cohabitating heterosexual couples, and married couples were recruited during 1978 and 1979. Methods of recruitment included advertisements and announcements made on television and radio, newspapers, and magazines. Surveys were mailed to participants, and couples were included only if both partners returned completed questionnaires. Couples were included in the ACS sample only if they were currently sexually involved or had had a sexual relationship at some point, lived together at least 4 days a week, and considered themselves a couple. A more detailed description of recruitment and data collection is available in Blumstein and Schwartz (1983).

Respondents

Lesbian sample. There were 784 lesbian couples in the ACS. An analysis of the birth years provided by participants indicates that the average age of lesbian respondents was 33 or 34 years when they completed the survey. They had been dating an average of 4 years and 3 months. The sample was 95% White.

Gay male sample. The gay male sample consisted of 969 male couples. Respondents' average age was 36 or 37 years at the time they completed the survey. They had been dating for an average of 6 years and 8 months. This sample was also 95% White.

Heterosexual married sample. The heterosexual married sample consisted of 4,287 couples. The average age for husbands was 40 or 41 years and for wives was 37 or 38 years. The married sample was 97% White. The married sample had been together as a couple (i.e., including time dating when they were unmarried) an average of 13 years and 7 months.[2]

[2]Because some previous research has indicated that relationship length is associated with greater desire for accuracy (e.g., Bissonnette, Rusbult, & Kilpatrick, 1997), we were interested in whether relationships of greater length evidenced relatively stronger effects of shared reality

Heterosexual cohabitating sample. There were 645 couples in the heterosexual cohabitating sample. The average female partner was 34 or 35 years at the time of survey completion, while the average male partner was 37 or 38 years. They had been dating an average of 3 years and 5 months. The sample was 96% White for the female partner, and 94% White for the male partner.

Measures

The survey included questions pertaining to respondents' actual and ideal relationships. Our analyses are based on ratings of relationship satisfaction and of traits describing the self and (actual and ideal) partner. Each item was rated on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*).

Relationship satisfaction. We used two measures of relationship satisfaction. First, participants indicated how satisfied they were with 11 specific aspects of their relationships on a relationship satisfaction scale. The items are (a) how the partner's job affects the relationship; (b) how their own job affects the relationship; (c) communication in the relationship; (d) moral or religious practices in the relationship; (e) the way the house is kept; (f) the amount of influence they have in decisions made in the relationship; (g) the couple's social life; (h) the amount of income generated in the relationship; (i) the way affection is expressed in the relationship; (j) how finances are managed in the relationship; and (k) the couple's sex life.

These 11 ratings were averaged to form a satisfaction scale with alphas of .88, .85, .87, and .90 for the gay, lesbian, cohabitating, and married samples, respectively. In addition, a single item assessed global satisfaction by asking "How satisfied are you with your relationship in general?" The relationship satisfaction scale and the single-item measure were strongly correlated. The two measures provided two independent methods of assessing relationship quality.

Trait adjective ratings. Respondents used 16 trait adjectives to rate themselves, their ideal partners, and their current partners. Specifically, a first set of ratings involves realistic self-descriptions: "How would you *realistically* describe yourself?" The second set involves descriptions of one's ideal partner: "How much of each quality would you want in an *ideal* partner? Tell us about the kind of partner you would like to have, whether this describes your current partner or not." The third set involves descriptions of one's

theory. However, correlations between relationship length and each factor in the model were quite low (i.e., < .13; Cohen, 1988), indicating that the relationship processes we demonstrated are not moderated by length of the relationship in question.

actual partner: "How would you *realistically* describe your partner?" The same 16 trait adjectives were used for all ratings: *sexy looking*, *affectionate*, *aggressive*, *romantic*, *"movie star" good looking*, *understanding of others*, *ambitious*, *compassionate*, *muscular build*, *forceful*, *accomplished in chosen field*, *express(es) tender feelings easily*, *shy*, *athletic*, *outgoing*, and *self-sufficient*. The order of presentation of the trait adjectives varied among the three sets, but was identical for all four samples and for both partners within each couple. Reliability for each of the scales exceeded .72.

Results

Overview of Analytic Strategy

We employed two separate analyses to test the two models of relationship satisfaction. To test the positive illusions model, we replicated as precisely as possible the analyses of Murray et al. (1996a). That is, we utilized path analyses via structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess whether having overly positive perceptions of one's partner is associated with greater relationship satisfaction. To test shared reality theory, we again used SEM, but employed a latent variable approach to determine if shared perceptions of one another are associated with heightened relationship satisfaction.

We used the structural equation program EQS (Bentler, 1993) for all analyses. The positive illusions and the shared reality models were tested separately for each sample (i.e., heterosexual married couples, heterosexual cohabitating couples, lesbians, and gay men). Analyses were conducted separately for each member of the couple, but included in a single model (consistent with Murray et al., 1996a).

In heterosexual couples, separate analyses were conducted for men and women. In same-sex couples, partners were randomly assigned to be Partner 1 or Partner 2. Overall model fit was determined using two descriptive fit indexes, as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). These were the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1992) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1980). CFI values greater than .90 and RMSEA values less than .08 were used as indicators of well-fitting models.

Testing the Positive Illusions Model of Relationship Satisfaction

According to Murray et al. (1996a), individuals project their positive images of themselves onto their relationship partners and also project their idealized image of relationship partners in general onto their own relation-

ship partner. The positive illusions model predicts that projection of these idealized images leads to greater satisfaction in close relationships. That is, people are more satisfied when they view their relationship partner more favorably than the partner views herself or himself. This possibility was tested using the relationship satisfaction scale and also the single-item assessment of relationship satisfaction as outcome variables.

To assess positive illusions in the current sample, we closely modeled our analyses after Murray et al. (1996a) analytic strategy. Specifically, we utilized SEM to examine the path coefficients of each of the predicted paths simultaneously in a single model (i.e., path analyses) using observed variables (i.e., averages of each of the trait adjective scales and the satisfaction scale, as well as the single-item measure of relationship satisfaction).

Murray et al. (1996a) provided a full discussion of the procedures they utilized, which we replicated exactly. For example, for each participant, we modeled pathways between (a) the respondent's self-perceptions and the respondent's perceptions of the ideal partner; (b) the respondent's perception of the ideal partner and the perception of the respondent's actual romantic partner; and (c) the perception of the actual romantic partner and the respondent's relationship satisfaction. These paths were tested in the same model for both members of the couple (female and male, for heterosexual couples, or a randomly selected "Partner 1" and "Partner 2" for lesbian and gay couples), as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

To provide multiple assessments of the construct of satisfaction, we separately tested the model using the relationship satisfaction scale and also the single-item measure of relationship satisfaction. The same model testing procedure was used for each of the samples and for each of the measures of satisfaction.

Overall, using the relationship satisfaction scale, the positive illusions model had acceptable levels of fit for the gay (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .04), lesbian (CFI = .90, RMSEA = .04), married (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .04), and heterosexual cohabiting (CFI = .92, RMSEA = .02) samples. Standardized path coefficients for each of the samples are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

When considering the path coefficients of the model, the relation between the views of one's partner and relationship satisfaction was significant and positive across the four samples. This means that people who have more positive images of their partners were more satisfied in their relationships. The association between their partners' self-ratings and relationship satisfaction was also significant and positive across the four samples. However, the magnitude of the path coefficients from the actual partner scale to relationship satisfaction was positively valenced and much stronger than the path coefficients from the partner's self-ratings scale to relationship satisfaction. Therefore, there was a tendency for people to be more satisfied in their
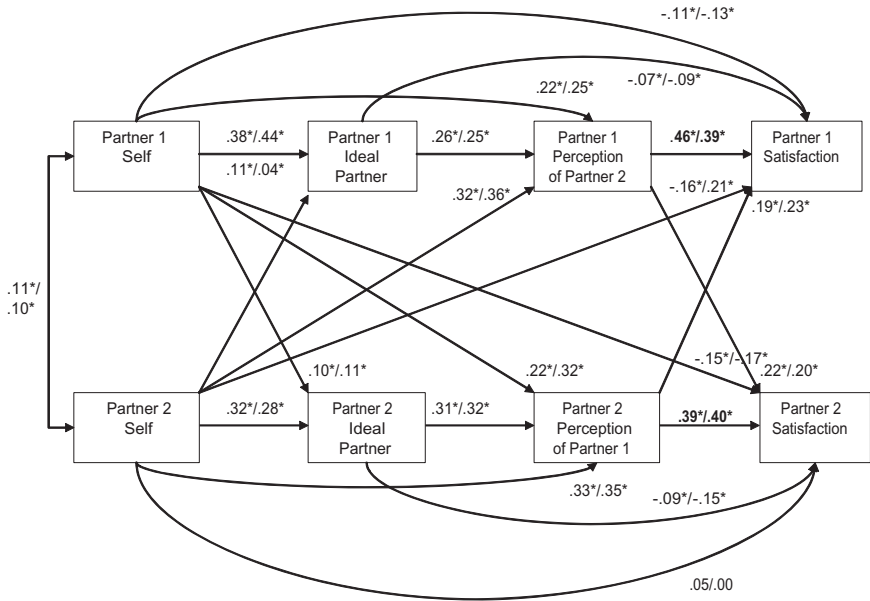
Figure 1. Standardized path coefficients for lesbian/gay male samples for the positive illusions model. For each path, the first number represents the lesbian sample and the second number represents the gay male sample. Model fit: lesbians, CFI = .982, RMSEA = .051; gay men, CFI = .956, RMSEA = .063. *$p < .05$.

relationships if they perceived their partners more positively than the partners perceived themselves.

Separate analyses using the single-item measure of relationship satisfaction (rather than the satisfaction scale) found very similar results in terms of overall fit, significance, and direction of predicted pathways. Because the analyses using the single-item measure replicated those utilizing the satisfaction scale, they will not be discussed further.

Notably, we did not see evidence that lesbian and gay couples benefited more from positive illusions than did heterosexual couples. That is, the model operated as predicted in all four samples, but we did not find substantially stronger support among lesbians or gay men.

Testing the Contrasting Shared Reality Model of Relationship Satisfaction

As a contrast to the positive illusions perspective, we also tested the shared reality model. Specifically, we tested the possibility that people may be
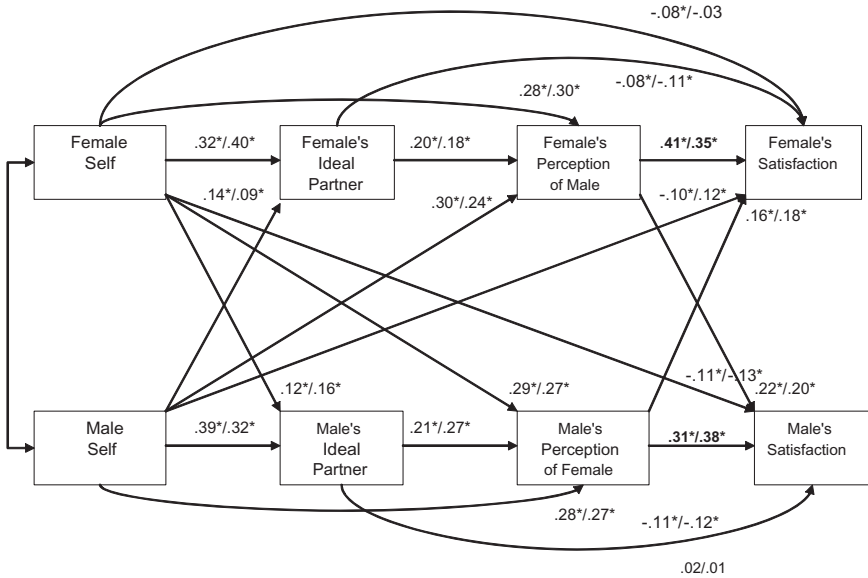
Figure 2. Standardized path coefficients for married/cohabitating heterosexual samples for the positive illusions model. For each path, the first number represents the married sample and the second number represents the cohabitating sample. Model fit: married couples, CFI = .989, RMSEA = .056; cohabitating couples, CFI = .971, RMSEA = .062. *$p < .05$.

more satisfied with their relationships when their partners see them as they see themselves. This may be especially important to lesbian and gay individuals because of societal stigma (cf. Hardin & Conley, 2001; Swann et al., 1994; Wayment & Peplau, 1995).

To assess shared reality processes in these samples, we utilized SEM with latent variables. We conducted confirmatory factor analyses using variables that were developed via aggregation across the 16 individual traits. The shared reality factor model was tested separately in the gay, lesbian, married, and cohabitating heterosexual data sets. If the shared reality model is accurate and veridical, then the respondent's self-ratings and ratings of the relationship partner should be highly correlated. If these variables were indeed highly correlated (because of consensus among the partners with respect to these traits), then these observed variables should give rise to a single latent variable based on their shared variance (i.e., shared perspectives between the two partners).

However, the pattern predicted by shared reality did not emerge. That is, there did not appear to be a strong, shared perspective between the individual members of the couples. Therefore, the shared reality model did not

fit well in either of the heterosexual or the gay and lesbian samples (CFIs ranged from .80 to .83; RMSEAs ranged from .18 to .26). If the shared reality latent variable, indicating shared perceptions between members of the couple, had been significant, then we would have next modeled a path between the shared reality latent variable and relationship satisfaction. However, because partners were not strongly engaging in shared reality processes (i.e., they were more likely to see their partners more positively than the partners see themselves), there was no shared reality latent variable. Thus, we had no way to link shared reality (through SEM) to relationship satisfaction.

Summary

We tested two models of satisfaction in close relationships. We found clear evidence that participants in these four samples had positive illusions about their relationship partners. Further, these positive illusions predicted satisfaction in the relationships. However, we found no evidence that shared reality processes were operating among this group of participants. Because shared reality was not happening among these samples, it could not predict satisfaction.

Discussion

The present research found clear support for the usefulness of the positive illusions perspective for understanding relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. In all four types of couples that we examined, people were more satisfied in relationships in which they viewed their partners more favorably than the partners viewed themselves. The positive illusions model of relationship satisfaction appears to have a robust theoretical foundation that is more predictive of satisfaction than alternate models. Therefore, having a moderately elevated view of one's partner appears to be healthy for romantic relationships across sexual orientations.

Further Avenues for Examining Shared Reality in Close Relationships

We were perplexed that shared reality was not a significant predictor of satisfaction in close relationships. Even Murray et al. (1996a) found that shared reality processes were operating in their samples, though not as strongly as positive illusions processes. Moreover, other researchers have identified a number of conceptually related phenomena, including research on

empathic accuracy (Bissonnette et al., 1997), perceived responsiveness (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), and perceived similarity (see Miller, Perlman, & Brehm, 2007), which have been linked to positive relationship outcomes.

It seems plausible that shared reality and positive illusions operate under different circumstances. For example we may implicitly prefer our partners to perceive us more positively than we perceive ourselves (perhaps because of how that causes them to react to us), but we may not want to know that their perceptions are inaccurate. To test this possibility, researchers could ask partners to rate one another separately. Subsequently, members of the couple would be asked to discuss those ratings. When discussing the discrepancies between self and partner, the anxiety caused by lack of consensus (as predicted by shared reality) may evidence itself. That is, we would expect people to have more positive feelings for partners when their partners overtly and explicitly share their perceptions of them. If this reasoning is correct, the current research shows one limitation of shared reality in the context of romantic relationships: that its effects are limited to conscious constructions of reality.

Another possibility is that there are specific categories of shared beliefs that lead to greater relationship satisfaction. The present research indicates that when it comes to personal traits, people would rather their partners feel positively about them than to view them accurately. This research did not test the possibility that relationship satisfaction may be influenced by agreement about other topics, such as political attitudes, enjoyability of recreational activities, how to best spend money, or the appropriate level of cleanliness in the household. All of these issues are likely associated with increased happiness in any given relationship (see Miller et al., 2007).

Positive Illusions Versus Shared Reality in Gay and Lesbian Relationships

The present study provides the first test of the shared reality and positive illusions models of relationship satisfaction in gay and lesbian relationships. The current research investigated whether people in socially stigmatized relationships would be particularly likely to benefit when their partners had an accurate view of their personal attributes, one that agreed with their own self-assessment (cf. Wayment & Peplau, 1995). We found no evidence that shared reality was an important predictor of satisfaction in gay and lesbian couples. Rather, individuals in both same-sex and opposite-sex couples had greater relationship satisfaction when the partners had enhanced images or positive illusions about one another.

The similarity that we found among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples is not altogether unexpected. Reviews of research on same-sex

couples (e.g., Haas & Stafford, 1998; Peplau & Beals, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) have documented many commonalities among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual relationships in love, satisfaction, and a wide variety of other domains. However, the current research advances our understanding of romantic relationship processes in at least two ways. First, it demonstrates the versatility of the positive illusions model. Second, it indicates that even though lesbians and gay men suffer significant stigmatization, this stigmatization does not appear to affect satisfaction processes in their romantic relationships.

Of course, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks of this sample. Although quite large, the American Couples Study sample was not representative. We know that participants in the ACS were more educated and younger than the general population (as are most participants in psychological studies). A problem more unique to this sample concerns how representative the lesbian and gay samples are of members of gay communities in the U.S.

Because sexual orientation is both concealable and stigmatized, it is currently impossible for researchers to identify confidently a randomly selected sample of lesbian and gay individuals. We can speculate that the lesbian and gay people who consented to participate in the study had more crystallized gay identities than did nonparticipants. For example, women who are struggling to decide for themselves whether or not they are lesbian would probably be less likely to request a questionnaire designated for lesbians than would women who strongly identify with that term. The lesbian and gay samples were also likely more "out," because they were not concerned about having a questionnaire mailed to them that identified them as gay or lesbian.

Perhaps we observed a great deal of similarity between the gay and heterosexual samples because the lesbian and gay samples were more "out" than the gay population as a whole. Gay men and lesbians who are more closeted might display a different pattern of results. For example, in a very closeted sample, gay and lesbian participants might demonstrate a greater need for shared reality. That is, consistent with our earlier hypothesis, those who are closeted might feel a stronger need to be with people who see them as they really are.

In summary, the present research suggests that among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, people who view their partners as better than the partners see themselves tend to be more satisfied with their relationships. The French writer François Mauriac said it well: "To love someone is to see a miracle invisible to others" (as cited in Roney, 2000, p. 103). Based on the present research, it appears that this type of rose-colored perception can promote satisfaction within diverse types of romantic relationships.

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