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Motivational underpinnings of romantic partner perceptions: Psychological and physiological evidence

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——————————— ABSTRACT ———————————

This research examined biases in perceptions of current versus former romantic partners. Study 1 employed individuals in dating relationships ($N = 161$) and examined whether perceptions of current partners' traits differed from perceptions of former partners' traits. We computed an index of a 'partner discrepancy bias' (PDB). PDB was related to relationship satisfaction. Study 2 assessed the motivational underpinnings of the PDB. We used a standard forced-compliance paradigm, using individually run participants ($N = 65$), to determine if partner perceptions are rooted in dissonance processes. Dissonance effects were manifest in both post-manipulation attitudes toward partners and post-manipulation nonspecific skin conductance. Dissonance effects were pronounced for low self-monitors. Implications regarding motivated perceptions in relationships are discussed.

Social psychological research that addresses perceptual patterns people employ when judging their romantic partners has found that such perceptions have important implications for relationship outcomes (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a). For instance, Murray et al. (1996a) found that idealized, distorted perceptions of current partners were significantly predictive of relationship satisfaction. Also, these same researchers found evidence that such idealized perceptions may actually serve to lead to positive relationship outcomes (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b). This body of research, dealing with understanding both the roots and implications of perceptions of romantic partners, provides an important framework for understanding phenomenological underpinnings of intimate relationships. Research on biases regarding the perceptions of romantic partners may be divided into classes concerning: (i) general biases in the perceptions of romantic partners, and (ii) differential perceptions of romantic partners between members of distressed and nondistressed couples. This article examines relationship-relevant correlates of differential perceptions of current versus former partners in addition to potential motivational forces that may underlie such differential perceptions.

General biases in the perceptions of romantic partners

Research has shown that people tend to idealize their significant others (e.g., Geher, 2000; Hall & Taylor, 1976). When describing their romantic partners, people tend to provide very socially desirable descriptions (Murray et al., 1996a). Such a tendency to idealize one's romantic partner may be an extension of the tendency for one to appraise his or her friends as relatively more positive than he or she appraises the average person (Brown, 1986). Indeed, several researchers have replicated this finding (cf., Taylor & Brown, 1988). The tendency to idealize romantic partners may well be an extension of this tendency to hold enhanced perceptions of intimates.

Sandra Murray and her colleagues (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1994; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b) also demonstrated that people tend to idealize their significant others. In describing how people perceive their significant others, Murray takes a stance consistent with Gestalt psychology, suggesting that people tend to understand their partners as unified wholes whose behaviors are relatively consistent. According to Murray, because people are committed to their romantic partners, they are motivated to perceive their partners in positive terms.

In a study of this tendency for people to idealize their romantic partners, Murray et al. (1996a) had both members of dating and married couples describe themselves, their significant others, and their ideal

significant others. These authors found that subjects' perceptions of their partners were closer to their descriptions of their ideal significant others than to their partners' descriptions of themselves. Martz et al. (1998) similarly found that individuals hold positive illusions of intimate others, particularly when prompted to think about their own social identity in a relational context. This tendency for people to idealize romantic partners seems to be particularly pronounced for individuals involved in relatively nondistressed relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985; Murray et al., 1996a).

Perceptions of former partners

Gray and Silver (1990) explored how each member of a divorced couple described the relationship and the divorce. Evaluations of the partners were implied in the items these researchers used. Participants saw themselves as 'less responsible than the ex-spouse for the break-up, . . . saw themselves as less of a villain and more of a victim than they saw their ex-partner, and wanted to reconcile less with their ex-spouse than they thought their ex-partner wanted to reconcile with them' (Gray & Silver, 1990, pp. 1185–1186). Such findings suggest that members of divorced relationships tended to employ biases that cast ex-partners in relatively poor light. These results are consistent with the notion that members of distressed relationships tend to make attributions about their partners that serve to enhance negative perceptions.

Summary and introduction to current research

We designed this research to explore issues underlying biases in perceptions of romantic partners. Former research along these lines has addressed two separate general biases including the tendency to idealize current partners (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a) and the tendency to devalue former partners (e.g., Gray & Silver, 1990). We designed the current study to explore these biases concurrently, to examine their utility in predicting relationship-relevant outcomes, and to explore possible motivational underpinnings of these biases.

Study 1

In addition to examining perceptions of both current and former partners concurrently, this study differs from prior studies in that it examined perceptions by having participants rate targets in terms of the Big 5 personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and three continuous attachment style dimensions (Collins & Read, 1990). Judgments pertaining to the Big 5 traits allow for an assessment of general trait perceptions, whereas judgments of attachment style dimensions allow for an examination of perceptions of dispositional qualities that are highly relevant to relationship outcomes.

In addition to examining this discrepancy between participants' perceptions of current and former partners along these dimensions, this study

examined satisfaction with current relationships and the degree of distress regarding the break-up of the most recent prior relationship. We hypothesized that perceptual partner discrepancies would be reliably associated with relationship satisfaction in a way that enhanced participants' perceptions of their current relationship situations. Regarding break-up distress, we hypothesized that high levels of distress regarding the break-up of the most recent relationship would correspond to lower partner discrepancies, or, perhaps, even partner discrepancies in which current partners were rated more negatively than former partners.

Method

Participants. Participants included 161 heterosexual undergraduate students (96 females, 65 males; mean age = 18.93 years, $SD = 1.96$). To participate in this research, participants needed to (i) be presently involved in a significant monogamous relationship and (ii) have been involved in at least one previous significant monogamous relationship. Mean length of current relationship was 2.16 years ($SD = 1.12$). All participants were undergraduate students at a mid-sized state university in the northwest US who participated for extra credit in one of their psychology classes.

Materials. Materials included the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which contains 60 items for which a participant is supposed to report the degree to which each item is characteristic of him- or herself on a 5-point scale. Each item represents one of the Big 5 trait dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). We employed the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins & Read, 1990) to measure attachment style. This scale includes three continuous subscales: anxiety, dependency, and closeness, each including six items measured on a 5-point scale. Each of these subscales yields scores with socially desirable responses (e.g., not too anxious in relationships) corresponding to low scores and nonsocially desirable answers (e.g., is very anxious in relationships) corresponding to high scores. The relationship satisfaction questionnaire (Murray et al., 1996a) included three general relationship-relevant questions on 9-point Likert scales. We included a measure of degree of distress after a specific break-up (Simpson, 1990) to address whether affective reactions to break-ups were reliably associated with perceptions of current and former partners. This scale included two subscales. The first subscale addresses distress after break-up. This scale included four items that are all rated on a 5-point scale. The second subscale taps perceptions about how long it took for participants to recover emotionally from their most recent break-ups. This subscale included two items on 5-point scales. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire asking for relevant demographic data such as age and sex.

Computing partner discrepancy index. To obtain a general measure of the extent to which individuals perceived this *partner discrepancy* (i.e., differential perceptions regarding current vs. former partners), we computed a total discrepancy composite score based on scores from each trait dimension except extraversion. As a significant difference between perceptions of current and former partners was not obtained for the extraversion dimension (Table 1), it

TABLE 1
Means, standard deviations, and *F*-ratios assessing discrepancies between current and former partners across eight personality dimensions

	M	SD	α	F
Big 5 (Costa & McCrae, 1992)				
Openness				
Current partner	37.45	6.59	.66	21.81*
Former partner	33.97	6.61	.62	
Conscientiousness				
Current partner	44.92	9.06	.89	34.69*
Former partner	38.01	10.91	.91	
Extraversion				
Current partner	43.15	6.96	.75	4.75
Former partner	41.08	9.00	.85	
Agreeableness				
Current partner	44.40	8.10	.83	51.55*
Former partner	36.21	10.53	.89	
Neuroticism				
Current partner	30.61	8.75	.84	19.27*
Former partner	34.91	9.11	.83	
Attachment dimensions (Collins & Read, 1990)				
Dependency				
Current partner	15.06	4.82	.81	19.54*
Former partner	17.56	5.23	.83	
Anxiety				
Current partner	14.61	4.79	.74	19.62*
Former partner	17.07	4.97	.65	
Closeness				
Current partner	13.91	4.89	.77	17.31*
Former partner	16.24	5.15	.76	

* $p < .05$ using Bonferroni correction for Type I error: $N = 157$ for each contrast.

made sense to omit this dimension from the composite score. We computed individual discrepancy scores for each of the positively valenced dimensions (openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) by subtracting former partner scores from current partner scores. For the negatively valenced dimension of neuroticism, we computed a discrepancy score by subtracting current partner scores from former partner scores. We used this same method to compute discrepancy scores for the attachment dimensions of anxiety, dependency, and closeness. However, as these subscales were comprised of half as many items as the subscales from the FFI, these differences were doubled before being included in the discrepancy total variable.

Note that in computing the PDB variables (for both Studies 1 and 2), we combined multiple subscales based on 5-point Likert scale items. However, the subscales differed in terms of how many items were included. Thus, in essence, we combined subscales that were comprised of scales that varied in size. We considered using Z scores for all subscales to address this issue. However, a

complication arises given the nature of the phenomenon being studied here. It turns out that for the PDB to be manifest, the former and current partner scores need to be in raw format; when converted to all Z scores, the average discrepancy becomes 0, regardless of actual current/former partner discrepancy. This outcome results from the fact that for all subscales, means for both former and current partner subscales would become 0 (as means of Z distributions must be 0), leading to mean former/current partner discrepancies of 0. In other words, using standardized scores, instead of weighted raw scores (as used here) would lead to a state of affairs not telling of the phenomenon being documented here. After we computed each discrepancy score for all seven dimensions, we summed these scores to create a total discrepancy score for each participant.

This computational method assumes that people generally rate openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability in more positive terms than their opposites. This idea is consistent with a good deal of work regarding perceptions of the Big 5 traits (cf., Kenny, 1994). Kenny's review of work on this topic also suggests that self–other discrepancies exist less for extraversion than for the other Big 5 dimensions, supporting the omission of extraversion from the current composite variable. Also, this scoring procedure assumes that the relatively secure ends of attachment style dimensions (e.g., independent) are rated as more socially desirable than their less-secure counterparts (e.g., dependent). This point is consistent with the work of Latty-Mann and Davis (1996).

Procedure. Participants completed the questionnaires in groups of approximately 30. After completing informed consent forms, participants were given measures of the NEO-FFI and AAS to describe themselves. Next, they completed background questions (e.g., length of current relationship and age) and the measure of relationship satisfaction. Participants then completed versions of the NEO-FFI and AAS to describe first their current and then their most recent former romantic partners. Finally, they completed the Intensity and Duration of Emotional Distress Index. When they were done, participants were thanked and debriefed thoroughly.

Results

We designed analyses to examine differences in variables representing perceptions of three different kinds of targets (self, current romantic partner, former romantic partner) across eight primary personality dimensions (the Big 5 personality traits and the three adult attachment dimensions). We also designed analyses to examine the nature of current versus former partner discrepancies in perception. First, for each of the eight variables of interest, we computed a mixed ANOVA with current partner versus former partner rating as the within-subject factor and with participant sex as a between-subjects factor. We included this between-subject factor to see whether rating discrepancies interacted with participants' sex. We included means, standard deviations, and F-ratios for within-participant effects (Table 1). We obtained several significant differences. For each trait dimension except extraversion, participants' current partners were rated more positively than their former partners. For instance, current partners were rated as more agreeable ($M = 44.40$, $SD = 8.10$) than former partners ($M = 36.21$, $SD = 10.53$; $F(1,154) = 51.55$, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .25$). Thus, participants generally demonstrated the hypothesized partner perception

biases. Note that alpha coefficients for each primary variable are included in Table 1; in general, these scales reached acceptable levels of internal reliability (mean $\alpha = .79$).

In general, participant sex did not interact significantly with former versus current partner ratings. However, one significant interaction was found; a significant sex-by-rating interaction was obtained for neuroticism ($F(1,154) = 7.89$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .05$). The pattern of means speaking to current partner and former partner neuroticism levels as a function of participant sex suggests that this interaction is primarily due to the fact that females rated current partners ($M = 27.66$, $SD = 8.34$) as significantly less neurotic than former partners ($M = 34.05$, $SD = 9.64$; $t(91) = 5.09$, $p < .01$), whereas males did not rate current partners ($M = 34.86$, $SD = 7.64$) as significantly different on this dimension than former partners ($M = 35.82$, $SD = 7.90$; $t(63) = .65$, ns).

The partner discrepancy bias variable. The total partner discrepancy index (the derivation of which is described in the Methods section) demonstrated reasonable internal reliability ($\alpha = .72$). Also, the distribution of this variable clearly speaks to the biases being addressed in this research with a mean that deviates considerably from 0 ($M = 37.20$, $SD = 56.29$). If participants generally perceived their current and former partners as having similar personality traits, the mean of this distribution would be 0. A one-sample t-test found that this mean (37.20) is in fact significantly greater than 0 ($t(157) = 8.31$, $p < .01$). This finding suggests that participants clearly demonstrated a perceptual bias.

Correlates of partner discrepancy bias. To assess the interrelationships between partner discrepancy bias (PDB) and the dispositional variables included in this research, we computed zero-order correlations between PDB and participants' own scores on the eight dispositional variables assessed. Of eight such correlations, six were significantly different from 0. The correlations between the Big 5 variables and PDB were, respectively, openness ($r(158) = -.01$, ns), conscientiousness ($r(158) = .17$, $p < .05$), extraversion ($r(158) = .21$, $p < .01$), agreeableness ($r(158) = .11$, ns), and neuroticism ($r(158) = -.26$, $p < .01$). The correlations between the attachment style variables and PDB were, respectivly, anxiety ($r(158) = -.20$, $p < .05$), dependency ($r(158) = -.28$, $p < .01$), and closeness ($r(158) = -.29$, $p < .01$). Thus, PDB scores were positively associated with extraversion and conscientiousness and negatively associated with neuroticism in addition to the anxiety, closeness, and dependency subscales of the AAS. Importantly, the AAS subscales are all scored such that higher scores have a relatively nondesirable connotation (e.g., high scores on the closeness subscale correspond to having problems forming intimate bonds with others).

To further examine the degree to which these dispositional variables predict PDB, we computed a standard multiple regression using participants' own scores on each of the eight dispositional variables as predictor variables and PDB as the dependent variable. Although a significant amount of overall variability in PDB was explained by this set of predictor variables ($R^2 = .14$, $F(8,149) = 3.01$, $p < .01$), none of the predictor variables independently accounted for a significant amount of variability in PDB.

Correlates of relationship satisfaction. We predicted that PDB would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. First we computed correlations (Table 2). In addition to an analysis correlating 'total discrepancy' scores with

relationship satisfaction, we conducted analyses that correlated participants' own Big 5 scores with relationship satisfaction. Three personality traits were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction including conscientiousness ($r(161) = .31, p < .01$), extraversion ($r(161) = .20, p < .05$), and neuroticism ($r(161) = -.20, p < .05$). Thus, participants who were conscientious, extraverted, and emotionally stable, tended to be satisfied with their relationships as well. Also, each of the attachment variables was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction in meaningful ways (Table 2). PDB was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r(157) = .39, p < .01$). In other words, people who tended to perceive their current partners as significantly more socially desirable than their former partners tended to report more satisfaction with their relationships compared with people who did not perceive much of a discrepancy between these partners.

We computed a subsequent standard multiple regression analysis to further examine the predictive value of each of these variables in predicting relationship satisfaction. In this analysis, we entered nine predictor variables in an attempt to predict relationship satisfaction. These nine variables represented participants' own scores on each of the Big 5 traits, their scores on the attachment subscales, and their PDB score. Overall, a significant amount of variability in relationship satisfaction was accounted for by this set of predictor variables ($R^2 = .31$, $F(9,147) = 7.33, p < .01$). Three of these predictor variables accounted for a significant amount of unique variability in relationship satisfaction (Table 2). Specifically, participants' scores on the anxiety and closeness

TABLE 2
Standard regression and zero-order correlations predicting relationship satisfaction from dispositional variables and partner discrepancy bias (PDB)

Relationship satisfaction (DV) Predictor variables	B	r	β	sr^2	t
Big 5					
Neuroticism	.03	−.20*	.09	.01	1.11
Extraversion	.01	.20*	.05	.00	.58
Openness	−.02	−.03	−.06	.00	.75
Agreeableness	−.04	.10	−.11	.01	1.42
Conscientiousness	.05	.31*	.14	.02	1.86
Attachment subscales					
Anxiety	−.14	−.35*	−.24	.04	3.06**
Dependency	−.03	−.33*	−.06	.00	.56
Closeness	−.13	−.27*	−.23	.03	2.40*
PDB	.01	.39*	.26	.06	3.54**
Constant	15.59				6.43**
					$R^2 = .31$
					R^2 (adjusted) = .27
					$R = .56**$

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; note that 'sr^2' stands for 'semi-squared partial correlations,' or the unique amount of variability in the dependent variable accounted for by a particular predictor variable.

AAS subscales and PDB each contributed significantly. PDB was the strongest predictor (a point made clearly by a significant semi-squared partial correlation: $sr^2 = .06$, $p < .05$), supporting the notion that PDB is useful in understanding relationship outcomes.

As PDB is comprised of two conceptually distinct variables, global perception of current partner and global perception of former partner, it may be that the predictive value of PDB is disproportionately due to one of these conceptual subcomponents. To address this issue, we computed global current partner and global former partner variables. These variables represent participants' overall perceptions of their partners in terms of the composite of the seven variables addressed in this research (i.e., perceptions of partners in terms of the Big 5 traits and the three attachment style variables). As with the overall discrepancy variable, we omitted extraversion from the creation of these variables due to its lack of significant discrepancy between former and current partner ratings. To compute these global variables, we changed the signs of negatively valenced traits so the composite variables were comprised of components that were consistent. Also, as the attachment style variables were based on half as many items as the Big 5 variables, scores on these variables were doubled.

We conducted a standard regression analysis predicting relationship satisfaction from participants' own scores on the eight dispositional variables and their scores on these two newly created global partner perception variables. In most respects, the results were similar to the previously described regression analysis (Table 3). A significant amount of variability in relationship satisfaction was explained by the set of predictor variables ($R^2 = .33$,

TABLE 3
Standard regression predicting relationship satisfaction from dispositional variables and overall perceptions of current and former partners

Relationship satisfaction (DV) Predictor variables	B	β	sr^2	t
Big 5				
Neuroticism	.03	.10	.00	1.08
Extraversion	.03	.08	.00	.95
Openness	-.03	-.07	.00	.91
Agreeableness	-.05	-.13	.01	1.70
Conscientiousness	.05	.14	.02	1.86
Attachment subscales				
Anxiety	-.11	-.19	.03	2.47*
Dependency	.05	.01	.00	.10
Closeness	-.12	-.22	.03	2.30*
Global partner perceptions				
Current partner	.02	.32	.06	3.69**
Former partner	-.04	.08	.01	1.15
Constant	15.24			6.31*

$R^2 = .33$
R^2 (adjusted) = .28
$R = .57**$

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

$F(10,144) = 7.01, p < .01$). Of the two global partner perception variables, only perceptions of current partners independently predicted a significant amount of relationship satisfaction ($sr^2 = .06$). Former partner perceptions were negatively related to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.08$), as would be predicted. However, this variable did not account for a significant amount of relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that the 'current partner' component of the PDB may be most useful in predicting relationship outcomes.

As this aforementioned regression analysis suggests that current and former partner ratings may not both contribute toward explaining relationship satisfaction, we conducted two additional bivariate regressions to further explore this point. In these analyses, instead of asking if former versus current global partner perceptions both significantly predict relationship satisfaction, we set out to assess whether these variables were associated with unique slopes and intercepts in separate bivariate regression analyses (with one such analysis conceptualizing relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable and overall perception of current partner as the predictor variable, and the other also using relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable, but using overall former partner perception as the dependent variable).

These analyses did, in fact, provide support for the idea that former and current partner perceptions are uniquely related to relationship satisfaction. For the analysis using current partner as the predictor variable, the 95% confidence interval for the slope was between 5.19 and 9.37, while the 95% confidence interval around the Y-intercept was between -115.93 and -59.51. For the analysis using former partner as the predictor variable, the 95% confidence interval for the slope was between -4.78 and 0.60, while the 95% confidence interval around the Y-intercept was between -37.05 and 35.50. Neither the CIs for the slopes nor the CIs for the intercepts overlap across these analyses. This suggests that these different components of the PDB are in fact uniquely related to relationship satisfaction and, thus, warrant independent inclusion in the current framework.

Auxiliary analyses: Correlates of break-up distress. Perceptions of both current and former romantic partners may depend on the degree to which one felt distressed regarding the break-up of the prior relationship. To examine such relationships, we computed zero-order correlations between the two distress variables (overall distress about the break-up and length of emotional distress after break-up) with variables representing (i) perceptions of former partners, (ii) perceptions of current partners, and (iii) the discrepancies between perceptions of former and current partners.

We computed 14 correlations to examine the relationship between the two distress variables and the variables pertaining to perceptions of former partners. As with prior analyses, we did not include perceptions of partners' extraversion levels. Of these 14 correlations, only three were significantly different from chance. These three significant correlations seemed to tell a coherent story. For instance, the correlation between degree of distress after break-up and perceptions of the former partners' level of conscientiousness was significant ($r(157) = .23, p < .05$). Thus, this correlation suggests that seeing the former partner in a positive light was associated with being distressed about having broken up with that partner. The two other significant correlations of this set tell a similar story. Perception of former partner conscientiousness was positively related to perceiving the duration of break-up distress as relatively

long ($r(157) = .19$, $p < .05$). Perceiving the former partner to have an anxious attachment style was inversely related to break-up distress ($r(157) = -.18$, $p < .05$). Also, the correlation between length of distress after break-up (as opposed to magnitude of distress) and perceptions of the former partners' level of overly dependent attachment was significant ($r(158) = .25$, $p < .05$). This correlation suggests that seeing the current partner in a negative light was associated with being distressed for a longer duration about having broken up with the former partner.

Similarly, we computed 14 correlations to examine the relationship between these same two distress variables and the variables pertaining to perceptions of current partners. Of these correlations, only four were significant. As with the correlations pertaining to former partners, these significant correlations also seem to tell a coherent story. Break-up distress length was positively related to perceptions of current partner having issues with closeness ($r(158) = .16$, $p < .05$) and negatively related to perceptions of current partner's conscientiousness ($r(158) = -.23$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, magnitude of distress over break-up was positively related to perceptions of current partners' tendency to be overly dependent ($r(158) = .16$, $p < .05$).

Finally, given that these distress variables seemed to have some bearing on the nature of perceptions of both current and former partners, we computed a correlation to determine if the total partner discrepancy variable and the distress variables were related. Both of these correlations were significant. Furthermore, both the correlation between total partner discrepancy and distress ($r(158) = -.19$, $p < .05$) and the correlation between total partner discrepancy and length of distress ($r(158) = -.22$, $p < .01$) were negative, suggesting that being distressed about breaking up with the former partner was associated with less idealization of the current partner and less devaluation of the former partner.

Discussion

We designed this first study to assess whether people generally perceive significant discrepancies between the personalities of their current romantic partners and the personalities of former partners in their relationship history. This hypothesis was generally supported. Participants rated their current partners as significantly more open-minded, agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable than their former partners. Furthermore, participants rated current partners as generally having more appealing attachment styles (i.e., having less relationship anxiety, fewer issues with relationship closeness, and fewer tendencies to be overly dependent) compared with former partners.

Two caveats to these general findings are worth noting. First, extraversion did not yield a significant difference between former and current partner perceptions. This finding may have to do with the fact that extraversion is potentially less valenced compared with these other dimensions. In other words, although it may be obviously more desirable to be emotionally stable compared with neurotic, it may be less obvious whether introversion is more desirable than extraversion or vice versa. Also, some personality theorists have pointed out that this dimension tends to be more observable than other dimensions (e.g., Kenny, 1994), thus making it difficult for people to

construct idealized versions of current partners' levels of this variable. To the extent that extraversion is observable and has objective, biological roots (McAdams, 2001), ratings of others' levels of extraversion may be less prone toward perceptual distortion. Given this nonsignificant difference between current and former partner extraversion ratings, we excluded ratings of partners' levels of extraversion from many of the analyses.

An additional finding of note regarding analyses examining former and current partner discrepancies concerns the sex-related effects dealing with ratings of partners' levels of neuroticism. For females, a large discrepancy between current and former partner neuroticism was obtained. However, no such discrepancy was obtained for males. Thus, males tended to rate their current and former partners as similar in terms of this dimension. Furthermore, an analysis of the means in Table 1 suggests that males generally rated their female partners as relatively neurotic. For females, however, whether the target was the current or the former partner made a noticeable difference. This finding may result from females being more discriminating in making judgments about the emotional stability of intimates compared with males. Alternatively, this finding may suggest that females are more likely to show bias in making judgments of romantic partners' neuroticism compared with males.

Generally, the findings speaking to current versus former partner perceptual discrepancies are consistent with previous research on romantic partner perception, which suggests that people involved in committed relationships tend to idealize their current partners (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b) and devalue their former partners (e.g., Gray & Silver, 1990). This perceptual strategy may enhance the maintenance of intimate relationships.

Also, the current findings suggest that the magnitude of this perceived discrepancy is positively related to one's relationship satisfaction. In other words, people who perceived their current partners much more positively than their former partners tended to also be satisfied in their relationships. The regression analysis predicting relationship satisfaction from participants' own dispositions and PDB suggested that PDB predicted a substantial amount of relationship satisfaction. This relationship was particularly pronounced for the current partner component of the PDB. This finding is consistent with the work of Murray et al. (1996a), which suggested that perceptual biases in judging romantic partners may be especially predictive of relationship satisfaction. Creating an idealized image of one's current partner and a relatively devalued image of one's former partner may serve as a relationship enhancement function. Interestingly, consistent with the work of Murray and colleagues, idealization of current partner seemed even more important in predicting relationship satisfaction than devaluation of former partners. This idealization, which may have roots in a variety of perceptual and motivational mechanisms, may indeed play a key role in determining positive relationship-relevant outcomes.

Given that this research addressed perceptions of most recent former

romantic partners, variables pertaining to the nature of the prior break-up seemed relevant. In fact, distress regarding that break-up was significantly related to several partner perception variables in meaningful ways. Specifically, seeing former partners in *positive* ways was associated with higher levels of break-up distress, whereas seeing current partners in *negative* ways was associated with this same outcome. These findings suggest a particular perceptual pattern associated with distress over relationship break-ups that may have detrimental effects for individuals' current relationships. More specifically, these findings suggest that over-coming distress caused by break-ups may play a key role in developing the enhanced perceptions of current romantic partners that are associated with optimizing relationship outcomes.

Overall, this first study provided a detailed description of how individuals in serious dating relationships differentially perceive current and former romantic partners. It is likely that motivational factors are partly at work in creating the PDB. Specifically, this bias may well result from a *desire* to see one's current partner in idealized ways and a similar *desire* to see one's former partner in a relatively devalued manner. Although this motivational explanation fits the nature of the PDB, Study 1 did not collect any data addressing motivational causes of the PDB. In fact, current literature in this area shows a lack of research examining such motivational underpinnings of biases pertaining to perceptions of romantic partners. We designed Study 2 largely to address the question of whether the PDB has such hypothesized motivational roots.

Study 2

We designed this study to see if data speaking to the PDB fit with a cognitive dissonance explanation. Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggests that people are motivated to hold consistent cognitions across a variety of contexts. Previous researchers in the area of partner perception biases have appealed to dissonance theory as an explanation for a variety of such biases. For instance, Murray and Holmes (1997) suggest that the tendency to idealize current partners is partly rooted in the fact that 'individuals need to reach some sort of cognitive resolution between their hopes and doubts to justify their continuing commitments' (p. 586), an idea that pertains to the theory of dissonance.

Although prior researchers have appealed to dissonance as an explanation for partner perception biases, research using typical research paradigms to explore dissonance explanations (e.g., the forced compliance paradigm) has not been conducted. Often, the dissonance explanation is simply provided as a reasonable explanation for the data. We designed Study 2 primarily to address whether this motivational explanation of the PDB is warranted.

Motivational determinants of biases in the perceptions of romantic partners

Murray and Holmes (1994) proposed that as commitment in a relationship increases, people are motivated to idealize their romantic partners. Such a view is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). According to cognitive dissonance theory, holding dissonant cognitions leads to an aversive state, which motivates people to alter their cognitions in such a way to make the cognitions consistent with one another. The cognition, 'I am very committed to my partner' is not consistent with the cognition, 'My partner has a really bad personality.' Hence, anyone who held these two cognitions, according to dissonance theory, would be motivated to alter these cognitions in such a way so as to reduce dissonance. One obvious method by which to reduce this dissonance would be to re-evaluate the partner in a more positive light. The cognition, 'I am very committed to my partner' is quite consistent with the cognition, 'My partner walks on water.' Such motivational processes may, in part, explain why people tend to idealize their significant others.

Other research related to motivational determinants of biases in perceiving one's significant other is concerned with people's tendency to devalue potential alternative partners when involved in a committed relationship. Johnson and Rusbult (1989) argued that people tend to devalue alternative partners as a means of maintaining commitment in close relationships. These authors proposed that people might be motivated to devalue potential alternative partners to avoid cognitive dissonance. In a similar line of research, Simpson, Gangestad, and Lerma (1990) found that individuals involved in dating relationships, relative to those not involved in relationships, tend to perceive other opposite-sex persons as less physically and sexually attractive. This effect may also be understood from a dissonance perspective; devaluing potential alternative mates may help bolster one's decision to have chosen his or her particular mate.

Research concerning motivational causes of the devaluation of potential alternative partners provides some insight into the general phenomenon of why people tend to idealize their significant others. For a person to feel confident in his or her decision to be with his or her romantic partner, one may adopt two strategies. First, concerning his or her significant other, idealizing this partner would allow one to feel confident in his or her decision to commit to this partner. Second, concerning potential alternative partners and former partners, devaluing them, or seeing them as relatively unattractive, could also function to bolster one's confidence in his or her decision to commit to his or her current partner.

Factors involved in the study of dissonance processes

As we designed Study 2 to address the potential role of dissonance as a factor underlying the PDB, several specific aspects of cognitive dissonance theory and research need to be examined. Basically, dissonance theory proposes a cognitive-consistency model of human cognitions and attitudes; it suggests that people are motivated to hold consonant cognitions

(Festinger, 1957). Furthermore, the existence of dissonant cognitions, presumably, leads to a psychologically aversive state. This state, according to the theory, motivates steps that will restore cognitive consonance.

In research, these phenomena are often examined using a forced-compliance paradigm in which dissonance is elicited by having participants engage in counter-attitudinal behavior under conditions that they perceive as freely chosen (e.g., Croyle & Cooper, 1983). Participants under such conditions will often change their attitudes to be in line with their behaviors, a finding typically taken as evidence for dissonance. Study 2 employed such a forced compliance paradigm.

In addition to using a standard forced-compliance paradigm, we addressed two important research-related findings regarding dissonance. First, we examined potential physiological substrates of dissonance-like processes. Several researchers have found evidence that a state of dissonance is associated with autonomic nervous system arousal (e.g., Croyle & Cooper, 1983; Elkin & Leippe, 1986; Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, & Nelson, 1996). To use a triangular approach to examining whether dissonance processes were at work when people make judgments regarding their romantic partners, Study 2 measured electro-dermal responding at critical times.

An additional finding from the dissonance literature that was addressed in Study 2 concerns self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) as a moderator of disso-nance-like results. Self-monitoring, defined generally as the tendency to effectively and knowingly engage in impression management strategies, has been found to moderate the nature of dissonance-like effects. In the original research in this area, Snyder and Tanke (1976) found that only low self-monitor participants in a free-choice condition reported post-manipulation attitudes that were consistent with the nature of counter-attitudinal essays they wrote. These authors explain this finding by suggest-ing that low self-monitors are more interested in behaving consistently with their core beliefs; as such, engaging in counter-attitudinal behavior under free-choice conditions would be particularly difficult for such individuals.

Introduction to the current study

This study was designed to assess whether the PDB observed in Study 1 is rooted, at least partly, in dissonance reduction processes. To address this question, we designed a forced-compliance paradigm that was directly pertinent to the PDB. Specifically, we asked participants in the counter-attitudinal conditions to write essays about the positive aspects of their former partners' personalities. As the importance of former partner deval-uation in predicting relationship satisfaction was somewhat unclear from Study 1, using a manipulation based on former, rather than current, partners in Study 2 should shed light on the relevance of former partner ratings for relationship-relevant outcomes. In the post-manipulation attitude assess-ment, we asked participants to rate both their current and former partners using a battery of dispositional measures, as in Study 1. In addition, we measured nonspecific skin conductance to look for a potential physiological

substrate to any dissonance-like phenomena that arose. Furthermore, we measured participants' levels of self-monitoring to examine whether this variable would have a moderating effect on post-manipulation attitudes.

The primary reasoning underlying this study is as follows: if the PDB is at least partly rooted in dissonance-like processes, then using a forced compliance paradigm that directly relates to the judgments involved in the PDB should yield effects that would be predicted by dissonance theory. These predicted effects include: (i) greatest attitude change for participants in the high-choice, counter-attitudinal condition; (ii) the greatest post-manipulation increase in electrodermal responding in participants in that same high-choice, counter-attitudinal attitude condition; and (iii) greatest effects for both of these prior predictions for low self-monitors. Such a pattern of results would provide empirical data supporting a dissonance explanation for the PDB.

Method

Participants. We collected data from 65 participants individually. Participants (45 females, 20 males; mean age = 20.85 years, *SD* = 3.08) were all involved in serious monogamous relationships (at the time of the study) that had lasted for at least 6 months and had been involved in at least one former relationship that they defined as 'significant.' All participants were undergraduate students at a mid-sized state university in the northwest USA who participated for extra credit in one of their psychology classes.

Materials. Materials included several self-report measures. We administered a modified version of Snyder and Gangestad's (1986) self-monitoring scale. We modified this scale slightly so that it was presented in a Likert-scale format on a 1–5-point scale. This scale includes 18 self-report items that address tendencies to engage in impression management strategies (e.g., 'At parties and social gatherings, I do not attempt to do or say things that others will like'). After being presented with the dissonance manipulation (outlined below in Procedure section), participants engaged in an activity very similar to the activity in Study 1. Specifically, they completed several personality measures to describe both their current and former romantic partners. To measure ratings of their respective partners on the Big 5 traits, we employed the Simple Rating Scale for Personality (SRSP; Fossum, Weyant, Etter, & Feldman Barrett, 1998). This measure has been shown to have high convergent validity and it is relatively brief and easy to implement. It includes seven items for each Big 5 trait (35 items in all). Each item was measured using a 5-point, Likert-scale format. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they believed that each item accurately described the respective targets. As in Study 1, we administered the AAS (Collins & Read, 1990) to obtain a broader sense of participants' perceptions of their respective partners. Participants used this measure to rate their current and former partners in terms of three continuous attachment styles.

In addition, we asked participants to write one of three essays. The instructions differed depending on experimental condition. We outlined the specific instructions in the Procedure section. Also, we included a manipulation check for the choice manipulation. This check included one Likert-scale item on a

15-point scale. This item asked participants 'How free did you feel to decline to write the essay?' with anchors of 1 *'very free to decline'* and 15 *'not very free to decline.'*

Computing partner discrepancy index. As in Study 1, we computed a PDB score computed for each participant. We computed PDB scores in a slightly different manner than they were in Study 1 as we used a different Big 5 measure. As the SRSP measure has seven items per subscale, and the AAS measure has six items per subscale, we multiplied AAS subscale scores by 7/6. This computation put all subscales on the same scale. Note that the rationale for such a computational method is equivalent to the one described in the Method section of Study 1. Next, for positively valenced dimensions, we subtracted former partner scores from current partner scores, while we subtracted current partner scores from former partner scores for negatively valenced dimensions. We summed these discrepancy scores to create the PDB variable. As with Study 1, we did not include extraversion scores.

Physiological apparatus. We used a 24-bit digital skin conductance amplifier and electrodes to measure nonspecific skin conductance (NSC). Contact Precision Instruments produced this equipment. A constant current of 10 rA was passed through two electrodes filled with 0.05 M NaCl (conductivity jelly). We connected these electrodes to each of the medial phalanxes of the ring and middle fingers of participants' nonpreferred hands. We measured NSC in units of microsiemen with higher numbers indicating more autonomic nervous system activity.

Procedure. Immediately prior to their arrival at the laboratory, we randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions. These conditions included: (i) a high-choice, counter-attitudinal condition; (ii) a low-choice, counter-attitudinal condition; and (iii) a control condition. After completing informed consent forms, all participants were connected to the two electrodes to measure NSC. Participants were then given 5 minutes to habituate to the situation. Next, we took a 3-minute baseline NSC reading. After this sample was taken, participants were given a booklet with the questionnaires. We asked participants to pay careful attention to the instructions and to not skip ahead. First, participants completed the demographic questionnaire. Next, they completed the self-monitoring scale. After they were done with this scale, they were instructed to stop and to depress a button that signaled the research assistant to re-enter. At this point, the research assistant turned the page in the booklet and explained the instructions that were pertinent to the manipulation.

The instructions differed depending on the condition. For participants in both the high- and low-choice conditions, we intentionally introduced a mismatch between the written and oral instructions. For participants in the high-choice condition, written instructions were as follows:

> This research deals, in part, with how people perceive the personalities of specific other people in their lives. All participants have been assigned to describe the POSITIVE personality characteristics of someone in their lives. You have been assigned to the 'former romantic partner' condition. In other words, if you have previously been involved in a significant romantic relationship, separate from any current relationship in which you may currently be involved, please use the space provided to write a brief essay describing the POSITIVE characteristics of this

former romantic partner. Please limit your answers to the space provided. Be sure to only focus on positive aspects of this person. Further, be sure to address his or her personality (as opposed to physique).

Notice that these instructions seem to frame the activity as completely free of choice (i.e., they seem to correspond to a *high*-, rather than *low*-choice manipulation). This manipulation was the high-choice manipulation because of the interplay between those written instructions and a pre-meditated act delivered by the research assistant. The research assistant waited for these participants in the high-choice condition to read the instructions. He then told them that they in fact *did* have a choice. He apologized for the constraining nature of the instructions. He then reminded them that they were free to leave at any time and that they were certainly under no obligation to write this essay. Regardless of these oral instructions, all participants in this condition agreed to write this essay without incident. The writing of those essays comprised the high-choice, counter-attitudinal behavior in this research. This behavior was considered counter-attitudinal based on the findings from Study 1, which showed that individuals tend to have a relatively negative perception of former partners' personalities. Thus, writing about the positive personality characteristics of these targets should serve a counter-attitudinal function that directly speaks to the PDB. Also, based on the results from the manipulation check, this combination of instructions had the effect of having participants in this group perceive themselves to have freedom over their ability to decline writing the essay (see Results).

For participants in the low-choice condition, written instructions were as follows:

> This research deals, in part, with how people perceive the personalities of specific other people in their lives. In the next part of the experiment, you will need to describe the POSITIVE personality characteristics of someone in your life. In this research, we are interested in how people describe four classes of people:
>
> A. Opposite-Sex Parents, B. Current Romantic Partners, C. Former Romantic Partners, or D. Same-Sex Friends
>
> Please CHOOSE ONE of the above options (A–D) who will serve as the target person of your essay by circling ONE of the letters above. Space for your essay is provide on this page and the next page; please limit your answers to the space provided. Be sure to only focus on positive aspects of this person. Further, be sure to address his or her personality (as opposed to physique).

As with the high-choice manipulation, notice that these instructions seem opposite from what would be expected. These written instructions emphasize choice, whereas this condition is the low-choice condition. The low-choice manipulation came about from a planned mismatch between these written instructions and the oral instructions given by the experimenter. The experimenter waited for these participants to read the instructions. He then told them that there was a problem. He explained that the research team needed a specific number of essays for each of the four aforementioned categories. He then regretfully indicated that all categories had already reached their quota except for the 'former romantic partner category.' He then indicated that if a participant had a former romantic partner, he or she was obligated to write an essay with this former romantic partner as the target. All participants complied without incident.

Participants in the control condition were given a comparable task that was not relevant to the PDB. In particular, they were given the following written instructions:

This research deals, in part, with how people perceive the personalities of specific other people in their lives. Participants in other conditions of this study have been assigned to describe the POSITIVE personality characteristics of specific others in their lives. In order to see if their descriptions relate to other people's perceptions of positive personality characteristics, we are asking some participants to write brief essays describing personality traits that they perceive as relatively positive in other people. You have been assigned to this condition. In the space provided, please outline three personality traits that you believe are perceived as positive by others. Be sure to label and define each of these traits in addition to stating why you believe each trait is relatively positive.

After the manipulation, we obtained a second 3-minute NSC sample from all participants. After this data collection, participants completed the rest of the packet. The subsequent questionnaires included the SRSP and the AAS with the participants' current partners as targets, followed by these same scales with the former partners as targets. Next, participants completed the check for the choice manipulation. Then we obtained a third 3-minute NSC sample. Finally, we thanked and thoroughly debriefed participants.

Importantly, notice that to elicit counter-attitudinal behavior relevant to the PDB, participants wrote essays about positive qualities of former partners. Given the nature of the PDB, two options exist for such a manipulation; the other option would have been to have participants write about the negative personality qualities of current partners. Given potential adverse consequences for participants' current relationships associated with this latter alternative, we chose the option of having participants write about positive qualities of former partners.

Similarly, due to the potential relationship-relevant outcomes associated with the manipulation, debriefing was extensive. We made participants completely aware of the nature of the deception, the purpose of the deception, and the goals of the research. We expected that participation in this research would have no long-term effects on participants' current relationships.

Results

Manipulation check. We designed the manipulation check to see if participants in the high-choice condition perceived themselves to have higher choice in their ability to decline writing the essays compared with participants in the low-choice condition. The dependent variable, which represents perception of choice, was on a 15-point Likert scale with lower scores indicating perceptions of more choice. A between-groups t-test confirmed that the manipulation worked. Participants in the high-choice condition score significantly lower (i.e. 'more choice'; $M = 2.00$, $SD = 2.22$) than participants in the low-choice condition ($M = 7.27$, $SD = 5.59$, $t(21) = 3.03$, $p < .01$).

Note that initially, the written instructions alone were designed to serve as the manipulation. In fact, for the first 33 participants, these instructions were used alone. These instructions are consistent with manipulations used by previous researchers, and, as such, they were expected to be effective. A preliminary data analysis conducted before all data were collected revealed a surprising finding: participants in the condition conceptualized as the 'high-choice' condition perceived themselves to have less choice than participants in the condition initially conceptualized as 'low-choice.' For some reason, the

written instructions were having an ironic effect. For the rest of the data collection, this natural effect of the written instructions was bolstered by the newly incorporated oral scripts (outlined earlier). This tactic had a dramatic effect. After this procedural change, the participants in the newly designated high-choice condition clearly perceived themselves to have significantly more choice than participants in the newly designated low-choice condition. Capitalizing on the ironic effect of the written instructions with a plausible oral script worked effectively to ultimately create the desired choice manipulation.

Attitudinal outcomes. The primary hypothesis regarding the attitudinal data is that participants in the high-choice condition should have a lower PDB than participants in the low-choice condition, followed by participants in the control condition. This PDB variable was relatively reliable, with a Cronbach's α of .79. The mean for this variable was 19.36 (SD = 34.13), suggesting that idealizing current partners and devaluing former partners was the rule among participants across conditions.

We computed a one-way ANOVA to see if PDB scores were significantly different as a function of experimental condition. We predicted highest scores for participants in the control condition, followed by participants in the low-choice and high-choice conditions respectively. The ANOVA was not significant ($F(2,61) = 1.14$, ns). However, the pattern of means was clearly consistent with the prediction (Table 4).

Given that the pattern of means mapped so well onto the prediction, but that the ANOVA was not significant, two options were considered. Initially, we considered the issue of low power. However, before we took steps to increase the N, we tested an alternative hypothesis. Recall that previous research has found that attitudinal dissonance-like effects are more robust for low compared with high self-monitors (Snyder & Tanke, 1976). Given this idea, we sought to examine whether self-monitoring interacted significantly with experimental condition. After dummy coding the condition variable and multiplying that variable by self-monitoring scores, we had an interaction variable that could be entered into a standard regression analysis. We then conducted such an analysis designed to see if condition, self-monitoring, and the interaction between these variables predicted partner discrepancy. We were specifically concerned with the interaction variable here. In fact, this interaction variable approached

TABLE 4

Means and standard deviations for PDB variable as a function of experimental condition presented separately for low versus high self-monitors

	PDB Mean and *SD*								
	All participants			Low self-monitors			High self-monitors		
Condition	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*
High-choice	12.15	40.77	24	−5.97	(34.69)ₐ	10	25.08	(40.93)	14
Low-choice	20.38	30.30	24	29.87	(32.04)ᵦ	14	7.08	(7.28)	10
Control	28.65	27.58	16	39.19	(33.39)ᵦ	6	22.32	(23.01)	10

Means with different subscripts within a column indicate means that were significantly different from one another using the Tukey HSD statistic.

significance in predicting PDB ($p = .07$). This empirical finding dovetailed with the theoretical rationale based on Snyder and Tanke's (1976) work encouraged us to conduct a median split for the self-monitoring variable. We then reconducted the ANOVA separately for low and high self-monitors.

Consistent with past findings, the post-manipulation attitudinal differences as a function of condition were considerably greater for low self-monitors than for high self-monitors. For low self-monitors, the one-way ANOVA was significant ($F(2,27) = 4.68, p < .05$). Conversely, the one-way ANOVA for high self-monitors was not ($F(2,31) = 1.02, ns$). The pattern of means for low self-monitors is consistent with the hypothesis, whereas the corresponding pattern for high self-monitors is not (Table 4). Interestingly, for low self-monitors in the high-choice condition, the valence of the PDB changed ($M = -5.97, SD = 34.69$). This finding suggests that low self-monitors in this condition found it so difficult to engage in this counter-attitudinal behavior under the free-choice condition, that they actually ended up rating their *former partners* more favorably than their *current partners* on average. Tukey HSD tests indicated that low self-monitors in the high-choice condition had significantly lower PDB scores compared with low self-monitors in either of the other two conditions.

Physiological outcomes. To address whether baseline to post-manipulation increases in NSC (measured in microsiemen units) differed as a function of experimental condition, we computed NSC difference scores by subtracting Time 1 scores from Time 2 scores. The specific prediction was that NSC increases would be highest for high-choice participants, followed by low-choice, and then control participants. First, we conducted a one-way ANOVA using this difference score as the dependent variable and experimental condition as the independent variable. This analysis did not reveal significant variability as a function of experimental condition ($F(2,60) = 2.20, ns$).

Next, as with the analyses for the attitudinal data, we recomputed the ANOVA separately for low and high self-monitors. In findings that largely parallel the attitudinal data, the ANOVA was significant for low self-monitors ($F(2,26) = 3.46, p < .05$), but was not significant for high self-monitors ($F(2,31) = .39, ns$). Furthermore, the pattern of means for low self-monitors suggest that high-choice participants had significantly higher increases in NSC compared with participants in the other conditions (Table 5). A Tukey HSD based on an alpha level of .05 found that, for low self-monitors, high-choice participants had significantly greater increases in NSC scores ($M = 1.92, SD = 1.27$) compared with low-choice participants ($M = .68, SD = .98$).

We also computed NSC difference scores representing change from post-manipulation to post-attitude expression by subtracting post-attitude expression scores from post-manipulation scores. Based on Festinger's (1957) conceptualization of dissonance, having an opportunity to change and express one's attitude to restore cognitive harmony should have the effect of making an individual more comfortable. We expected these scores to primarily be positive in sign, thus showing decreases in autonomic nervous system arousal after participants had the opportunity to engage in presumably appropriate cognitive restructuring that might reduce any dissonance. Furthermore, these scores were theoretically expected to be largest for participants in the high-choice condition, followed by, in order, participants in the low-choice and control conditions. We computed a one-way ANOVA to examine whether this

TABLE 5
Means and standard deviations for NSC increase (in units of microsiemen) from baseline to post-manipulation as a function of experimental condition presented separately for low versus high self-monitors

| | NSC increase Mean and SD | | | | | |
| | Low self-monitors | | | High self-monitors | | |
Condition	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
High-Choice	1.92$_a$	1.27	10	1.67	1.66	13
Low-Choice	.68$_b$	.98	13	1.65	1.45	10
Control	1.48$_{ab}$	1.23	6	.75	.97	11

Means with different subscripts within a column indicate means that were significantly different from one another using the Tukey HSD statistic.

difference score differed as a function of experimental condition. This ANOVA was not significant ($F(2,60) = .23$, ns). Unlike with the prior sets of analyses, separating participants into high and low self-monitoring groups and reconducting the analyses made no difference.

Discussion
The findings from Study 2 suggest that dissonance-related motivational underpinnings of partner perception biases may well exist. In particular, these findings suggest that low self-monitors may be particularly motivated by such processes. The dual tendencies for low self-monitors in the high-choice condition to (i) actually rate their former partners more positively than their current partners after the dissonance manipulation and (ii) show significant and large increases in an index of autonomic nervous system functioning after that manipulation suggest that low self-monitors' judgments of intimates may have especially strong motivational underpinnings. The general motives of low self-monitors to be consistent across situations and to behave in accord with inner values (Snyder, 1974) may strongly motivate perceptions of intimates that are consistent with their (presumably) freely chosen behavior.

Overall, for low self-monitors, the findings of Study 2 suggest that general perceptions of intimates, including both current and former romantic partners, may well have roots in a desire to reduce dissonance. The findings from this study show that a state similar to dissonance may be produced in such individuals by having them engage in counter-attitudinal behavior directly relevant to perceptions of romantic partners. Such behavior, when emitted under ostensibly free-choice conditions, led participants in this study to both psychological and physiological consequences that are consistent with dissonance theory.

This reasoning suggests that low self-monitors may be particularly prone to experience dissonance-like effects. As such, it makes sense that such

individuals would generally hold perceptions of intimates that facilitate cognitive consistency as a rule. The means from Table 4 are consistent with this view. Specifically, for control participants, the PDB was higher for low self-monitors (M = 39.19, SD = 33.39) than for high self-monitors (M = 22.32, SD = 23.01). Although the difference between these means was not significant ($t(14)$ = 1.20, ns), perhaps partly due to low power, this pattern of means speaks to this tendency for low self-monitors' natural perceptions of intimates to tell a story that optimizes cognitive consistency.

General discussion

Overall, we designed these studies to describe phenomenological differences in people's ratings of former versus current romantic partners as well as to explore potential motivational substrates of such perceptions. Study 1 found clear evidence that people generally tend to idealize current romantic partners and devalue former partners. These findings portray people in relationships as perceptual optimizers; as individuals who hold perceptions of intimates that bolster multiple aspects of their current relationship situations.

Much recent work in social psychology has shown that perceptions of romantic partners tend to be distorted in this way. In particular, recent studies show that people tend to idealize current romantic partners (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997) while concurrently derogating potential alternative partners (e.g., Simpson et al., 1990). The findings from Study 1 provide a clear explication of these biases. Furthermore, the findings from Study 1 expand on prior findings in this area in two important ways. First, Study 1 had participants concurrently rate both current and former partners. This method allowed for a direct assessment of differential perceptions of these different intimate targets. This methodology provided strong evidence for the generality of the PDB across many domains. A second contribution concerns the generality of perceptions addressed in Study 1. Partner ratings were made across both general trait (Big 5) and relationship-specific (attachment style) domains. This methodology allowed for an examination of romantic partner perceptions with regard to specific dispositional qualities that are integral to current research on intimate relationships.

In addition to describing the general nature of the PDB, Study 1 also addressed the predictive utility of PDB in understanding relationship satisfaction. Findings suggested that PDB is significantly predictive of one's satisfaction in a relationship. Closer examination revealed that general perceptions of current partners primarily account for this finding. This outcome is consistent with current work suggesting that idealized perceptions of current romantic partners significantly predict reported satisfaction in relationships (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a).

Although many researchers who examine romantic partner perceptions suggest that these kinds of perceptions often have motivational underpinnings, little experimental work has been conducted that examines whether

motivational determinants do indeed account for such perceptions. We designed Study 2 to obtain such evidence. By using a standard forced-compliance paradigm, Study 2 was able to examine whether the partner perceptions addressed in Study 1 were susceptible to a dissonance-relevant manipulation. Results for Study 2 generally support the idea that motivational factors may underlie perceptions of romantic partners. These results primarily suggest that such factors may underlie the perceptions of low self-monitors, who showed significant perceptual and physiological effects that were consistent with the dissonance-based hypotheses.

High self-monitors, by contrast, basically showed no changes in either PDB or NSC as a function of the experimental manipulation. This finding is consistent with prior work conceptualizing self-monitoring as a moderator of behavior in forced-compliance situations (Snyder & Tanke, 1976). It may well be that high self-monitors are motivated by different factors than low self-monitors. Whereas low self-monitors' judgments of intimates may be affected by a desire to have one's judgments match his or her behavior, high self-monitors may not be particularly motivated by this desire.

Thus, with regard to the question of whether motivational factors underlie perceptions of current and former romantic partners, Study 2 provides a somewhat qualified answer. The dissonance explanation of perceptions of intimates seems to fit low self-monitors well, whereas it seems to fit high self-monitors less well. Based on the findings from Study 2, low self-monitors seem to hold perceptions of intimates that are strongly affected by dissonance-relevant manipulations. Such manipulations also have important consequences for the internal, autonomic nervous system responses of low self-monitors, providing further evidence that internal motivating factors have great implications for low self-monitors and that such factors are likely to affect their perceptions of intimates.

Shortcomings

Although Studies 1 and 2 in combination provide evidence for a motivational component to the PDB, certain shortcomings need to be considered when examining the results described herein. For one, the PDB is presented as a biased and distorted perception across participants in both studies. Specifically, we assume that in general, participants' actual former partners are likely not significantly less socially desirable (e.g., more neurotic, less open-minded) compared with participants' actual current partners. Such an assumption clearly underlies the conceptualization of the PDB as a motivated bias. It may, in fact, be the case that participants in our studies did have former partners who were less socially desirable than their current partners at the time of data collection. Although we believe that it is unlikely that real differences exist between these actual target populations (actual former vs. actual current partners), our data do not allow for a clear answer regarding this point. Future research would benefit from collecting self-report data from actual former and current partners to address this question and other questions that cannot be addressed with our data sets here.

Similarly, these data do not allow for an examination of whether former partner scores indeed reflect devalued perceptions. Showing that such scores are particularly negative compared with current partner scores may speak more to the idealization of current partners than to biased perceptions of former partners. Future research can address this issue by having partners rate former partners and 'typical others' concurrently.

Also, note that our dissonance manipulation in Study 2, which had participants write positive comments about former partners, had the effect of reducing PDB. It is likely that other potential manipulations could have had effects that both decreased or increased PDB. An alternative way to decrease PDB could have been to have high-choice participants write about negative aspects of current partners. For ethical reasons, we chose not to pursue this methodology; we did not want people to dislike their current love interests, even for a short amount of time. Also, we could have had participants write about either: (i) the negative aspects of their former partners, or (ii) the positive aspects of their current partners. As these attitudes would have been consistent with the nature of the PDB already, these manipulations may have increased such perceptions. However, such attitudinal-consistent manipulations would not have fit the forced compliance paradigm employed here as well as the manipulation we chose. Regardless, such a methodology employed in future research would likely yield further insights into the motivational underpinnings of the PDB.

The results from Study 2 highlight dissonance arousal associated with the PDB, not dissonance reduction. This point is particularly manifest in the fact that, for low self-monitors, high-choice and counter-attitudinal behavior led to both increased NSC and increased attitude change corresponding to rating former partners relatively positively. Future research dealing with dissonance reduction, and the cognitive and physiological resolution of the phenomenological state created by this methodology would be needed to elaborate on how dissonance reduction may be employed vis à vis the PDB.

Conclusion

Overall, this work provided evidence for the PDB including (i) a detailed empirical description of this bias (Study 1) and (ii) data suggesting that the perceptions underlying this bias are likely steeped in motivational processes related to cognitive dissonance (Study 2). Furthermore, Study 2 found that self-monitoring levels seem to play a crucial moderating role in determining both the magnitude and malleability of the PDB. Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest that global perceptions of both current and former romantic partners may have important implications for satisfaction and success in intimate relationships.

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