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Motivated cognition in relationships

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Perceived partner responsiveness refers to the belief that partners care for one's needs and have positive regard for the self. The authors present a model of motivated distortion of partner responsiveness and review research relevant to this model. The model proposes that perceivers who are strongly motivated to bond with particular partners tend to see those partners as responsive, and this occurs independently of partners' actual responsiveness. Specific cognitive processes, such as biased interpretation and memory, assist motivated perceivers in reaching the desired conclusion that partners are responsive. In turn, biased perceptions of responsiveness may bolster individual and relationship well-being. Several studies support this model.

Addresses

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Motivated cognition is the pervasive tendency to think in ways that produce conclusions consistent with one's desires [1,2]. Although motivated cognition occurs in a variety of domains, most relevant to the present article are findings suggesting that motivation can bias perceptions of interpersonal relationships and of relationship partners [3–6].

Just what aspects of relationships should be most prone to motivated distortion? Several influential theoretical perspectives on interpersonal relationships converge to suggest that partner responsiveness, an umbrella term that captures being valued, cared for, and understood by the partner [7,8], should be strongly desired in close relationships. For instance, communal-exchange theory proposes that close relationships involve caring for a partner's needs and depending on the partner's care [9–11]. Similarly, attachment theory proposes that people depend on relationship partners as sources of safety and security [12,13]. Theoretical models on trust [14–16] posit that

trust in a partner's care is a necessary aspect of satisfying and committed relationships. Furthermore, several reviews of the literature on interpersonal relationships have concluded that partner responsiveness is critical for developing high quality close relationships [7,17]. Given that it is so important and desired, partner responsiveness should be a prime target for motivated distortion. In this article, we describe a program of research on motivated distortions of partner responsiveness.

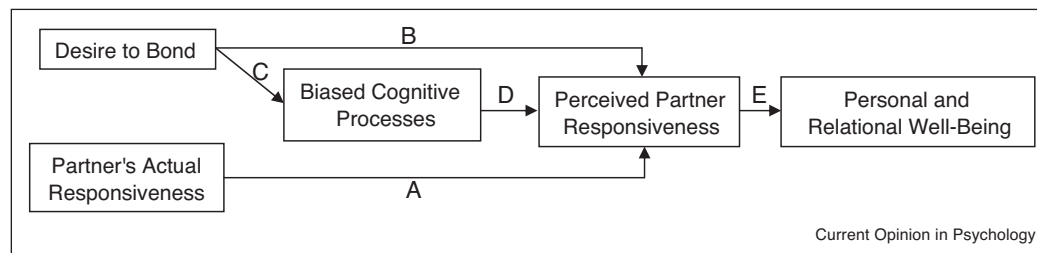
Of course, only people who desire to maintain or to cultivate close, communal bonds with a partner should be motivated to see the partner as responsive. In the line of research presented below, this desire to bond is operationalized in a variety of ways, including strong care for the partner's needs, which suggests desire to enter or maintain a close, communal relationship [18], high relationship commitment, which involves a desire to maintain a relationship [19], and positive evaluation of the partner, which indicates approach motivation [20].

A guiding model is depicted in [Figure 1](#). Perceptions of a relationship partner's responsiveness should be predicted by the partner's actual responsiveness, which would suggest some accuracy in perceptions of responsiveness (Path A). Independently of the partner's actual responsiveness, however, perceivers' desire to bond with the partner should result in motivated (and, therefore, biased) perceptions of the partner as more responsive (Path B).

Perceivers may utilize a variety of cognitive processes to help them reach the conclusion that desired partners are responsive. They may selectively attend to information that is consistent with this conclusion, remember information in a biased manner, and make biased interpretations of situations. Path C in [Figure 1](#) depicts a link between perceivers' desires to bond and their use of these biased cognitive processes. In turn, Path D depicts the effects of these biased cognitive processes on perceptions of the partner's responsiveness. That is, motivated perceivers should exhibit these biased processes, which may help them reach the conclusion that partners are responsive.

Perceiving partner responsiveness confers many benefits for relationships and personal well-being, such as greater relationship satisfaction [21], willingness to invest in relationships [15], pro-relationship behavior [16], more positive emotion [22], enhanced coping [23], and greater self-efficacy [22]. Accordingly, Path E in [Figure 1](#) is a link between perceived partner responsiveness and personal and relational well-being. As implied in [Figure 1](#), these

Figure 1



Model of motivated perceptions of partner responsiveness.

benefits may occur when perceived partner responsiveness is rooted in reality (indirect effect of Path A \times Path E) and when it is a result of motivated distortion (indirect effect of Path B \times Path E).

Evidence of biased perceptions of responsiveness

Several studies suggest the existence of biased perceptions of responsiveness. In two dyadic studies of romantic relationships [24], participants' own care or supportiveness toward their partner predicted perceptions of their partner's care or supportiveness. This effect was observed even after controlling for the partner's self-reports of their actual care or supportiveness. That is, perceivers who cared for partners believed that partners cared in return (Path B in Figure 1), independently of whether partners actually said they cared. There was also some evidence for accuracy (Path A in Figure 1); perceivers' perceptions of their partner's care and supportiveness were predicted by the partner's self-reports of their care and supportiveness. This pattern has been replicated in studies of friendships [25]. In addition, people who desire to avoid intimacy tend to downplay the significance of their partner's responsiveness [26].

Additional studies found evidence for biased perceptions even after controlling for additional indicators of the partner's actual responsiveness. For example, evidence suggesting motivated bias has been found after controlling for not just the partner's reports of their actual care, but also an external informant's (friend's or acquaintance's) perceptions of the partner's actual care for the perceiver [25]. In addition, a laboratory study of interactions involving romantic dyads found evidence for bias [27••]. One participant in each dyad ('perceivers') described a personal problem to their partner while being recorded. Perceivers who desired to maintain close bonds with partners perceived those partners to be more supportive during the interaction. This was the case even after controlling for partners' self-reports of their own behavior and judgments of partners' behavior made by a panel of objective observers who viewed the recorded discussions.

Experimental studies provide evidence for causal effects. In these studies, participants exposed to manipulations designed to alter their felt care for a partner reported changes in their perceptions of the partner's responsiveness, as predicted by our model. These manipulations included altering the experience of ease or difficulty while recalling instances of providing help to the partner [24], asking participants to vividly imagine prior events involving their own unresponsive behavior [25], and asking participants to behave in a warm or cold manner [25]. These manipulations had downstream effects on perceptions of the partner's responsiveness, as predicted by our model.

Specific cognitive processes that maintain security

Subsequent research has identified some of the specific cognitive processes that help motivated perceivers reach the conclusion that desired partners are responsive (Paths C and D in Figure 1). Lemay and Neal [28••] demonstrated the operation of biased memories of responsiveness. In a daily report study, perceivers were asked to report on their partner's responsiveness at the end of every day for seven days, including the partner's care, positive regard, and commitment. On each day, they also reported their memories of their partner's responsiveness yesterday on the same dimensions. Perceivers who were chronically motivated to bond with their partners had more positive memories of their partner's responsiveness across the seven days. In addition, perceivers' day-to-day fluctuations in motivation to bond with partners were associated with fluctuations in memories of the partner's responsiveness, both on the same day and on the next day. In other words, when perceivers were especially motivated to bond with partners on a particular day, they remembered their partners as more responsive to them yesterday, and they had more positive memories of responsiveness the subsequent day. All of these effects were independent of the partner's reports of their own responsiveness and even perceivers' initial perceptions of the partner's responsiveness on the day being remembered.

A behavioral observation study also reported by Lemay and Neal [28••] examined biased memory of support

interactions. Perceivers were asked to report on their memories of their partner's support behaviors two weeks and six months following a laboratory interaction. Perceivers who strongly desired to bond with partners before the interaction, as well as perceivers who increased in their desire to bond over time, remembered their partners as engaging in more supportive behaviors during the laboratory interaction when they were queried two weeks and six months later. Again, these effects were independent of perceivers' initial perceptions of the partner's supportiveness immediately following the interaction. They were also independent of the partner's reports of their own supportiveness following the interaction and the reports made by the panel of 11 objective observers who watched the discussions. In turn, these positively biased memories predicted increases in perceivers' trust. These studies suggest that biased memory of responsiveness operates independently of reality and initial encoding/perception.

Other research suggests biased interpretation of situations. According to theorizing on trust [14,29**], people gauge their partner's care by observing their partner's behavior in diagnostic situations — situations that reveal the partner's care. Disclosure of needs and desires to partners provides an opportunity for the partner to respond supportively to those needs and desires and, therefore, people should view situations involving their own self-disclosure as diagnostic of the partner's motives. In several studies, Lemay and Melville [30**] tested the prediction that perceivers who are motivated to bond with targets downplay their own self-disclosure if their partner behaved in an unresponsive manner (i.e., hostile, selfish, or neglectful behavior) because doing so allows them to attribute the partner's negative behavior to their own lack of disclosure of needs and desires, and avoid the more threatening attribution to the partner's lack of care. Several studies supported this view. For instance, people who strongly valued relationships with partners reported especially low levels of disclosure of needs and desires in situations characterized by the partner's unresponsive behavior, which predicted greater trust in the partner's care [30**]. A behavioral observation study suggested that these low perceptions of self-disclosure were underestimations of actual self-disclosure. In addition, a manipulation that enhanced motivation to bond with the partner (affirming the importance of the relationship) reduced perceptions of self-disclosure in situations characterized by the partner's unresponsive behavior [30**]. All of these findings suggest that perceivers downplay their own self-disclosure when a desired partner is unresponsive, and that this helps them dismiss the unresponsive behavior as nondiagnostic of partner care, thereby preserving trust.

A final study demonstrated that this biased interpretation was a motivated process [30**]. Substitution is a hallmark of motivated processes [31–33]; if process X occurs because it serves a goal, then the process will continue to

occur only until the goal is satisfied. If participants use some other means to satisfy the goal, then process X should not occur or, if it is already active, it should cease. Consistent with this view, Lemay and Melville [30**] found that motivated perceivers no longer downplayed their self-disclosure if they were first provided another means of dismissing their partner's unresponsive behavior as nondiagnostic. This suggests that biased interpretation is a motivated process, motivated by the desire to see valued partners as caring.

Consequences of bias

Several studies have demonstrated that biased perceptions of partner's responsiveness have positive consequences for relationship and individual well-being. Perceivers with positively biased perceptions of care report more relationship satisfaction [24] and exhibit pro-relationship affect, cognition, and behavior [25]. Perceivers who have positively biased memories of partners' responsiveness exhibit less emotional reactivity and feel more trust [28**]. Perceivers who interpret their partner's unresponsive behavior as nondiagnostic feel less upset and continue to evaluate their relationship positively in spite of that behavior [30**]. Biased perceptions of responsiveness in observed support interactions predicted perceivers' personal and relationship well-being just after the interaction, two weeks later, and six months later [27**]. Motivated perceptions of responsiveness appear to be consequential.

Conclusion

In summary, the model displayed in Figure 1 is well supported. People who strongly value relationships with their partners have positively biased perceptions of their partner's responsiveness. Specific cognitive mechanisms, such as biased memory and interpretation, appear to help motivated perceivers reach the desired conclusion that valued partners care for and value them in return. In turn, biased perceptions of responsiveness predict personal and relationship well-being. This model is supported by studies involving diverse methods, including dyadic questionnaires, daily report studies, behavioral observation studies, longitudinal studies, and experiments. Future research should investigate the conditions that constrain the operation of these biased processes, as motivated cognition does not always prevail [34**]; people sometimes do feel unloved despite their desire to bond [35]. Further, future research should be designed to examine potential boundary conditions on the benefits of motivated perceptions of responsiveness. For example, perhaps repairing or exiting some harmful relationships requires accurate detection of lack of responsiveness. Although these pursuits may reveal important exceptions, it is our view that motivated distortion of responsiveness is pervasive and usually confers benefits for individuals and relationships.

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