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Identification and the Commitment Shift: Accounting for Gender Differences in Relationship Illusions

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Previous work revealed gender differences in relationship illusions. Women, and not men, perceived their dating partners more favorably than their partners' self-perceptions. In two studies, the authors replicated these findings and showed they are moderated by relationship commitment but not by relationship satisfaction. Dating men low in commitment devalued their partners' virtues, whereas those high in commitment exaggerated their partners' virtues compared to their partners' self-perceptions. In contrast, dating women showed relationship illusions irrespective of their commitment. In Study 2, similar results were obtained with relationship-specific identification. Moreover, men's commitment mediated the effect of identification with the relationship. This suggests that gender differences in relationship identities exist at a general level and that men need to identify with and then commit to a specific relationship before they exhibit pro-relationship thinking, which women exhibit as general dispositions.

Keywords: relationship illusions; gender; commitment; identity

Do we see our loved ones better than they see themselves? Research suggests that the answer is yes (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a). People in happy and enduring relationships typically perceive virtues in their partners that their partners do not necessarily see in themselves. However, overlooked is the finding that men in dating relationships do not exhibit such relationship illusions (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b). Men, as opposed to woman, do not perceive their dating partners to be more virtuous than their partners' self-perceptions (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). The purpose of the present article is to offer an explanation for this gender difference in relationship illusions. We propose

that men in dating relationships may not exhibit relationship illusions unless they identify with and are thus sufficiently committed to their specific relationships.

IDENTIFICATION, COMMITMENT, AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

According to work on relational self-construals, how people define their sense of self can influence how they act and think in their close relationships. The more people identify their sense of selves with relationships in general, the more likely they are to show pro-relationship behaviors. For example, people who identify their sense of self with their relationships in general give greater importance to their friends' and family members' opinions and take into account others' needs and wishes when making major life decisions (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000, Study 2).

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An extensive body of research indicates that commitment also is an important reason why people engage in a variety of pro-relationship behaviors (Lydon, 1999; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). For example, committed individuals accommodate their partners' misbehaviors (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), devalue tempting alternatives (D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), and express a willingness to sacrifice personal well-being for the sake of the relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Hence, both relationship identification and commitment foster relationship maintenance behaviors. In addition, commitment may very well mediate the association between relationship identification and relationship maintenance. Indeed, one of the reasons why people commit to their relationships is because they see their relationships linked to their identities: Their relationships define who they are (Lydon, 1996). If one identifies with the relationship, then one should be especially committed to the relationship. In turn, commitment should motivate one to think and act in the best interest of the relationship.

Given that a woman's sense of self is more oriented toward her personal relationships than is a man's (e.g., Cross et al., 2000; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; see Cross & Madson, 1997, for a review), women may be more likely than are men to enter a relationship believing it reflects their identities. Such a gender difference in relational identity may help explain previous work showing qualitative differences between men's and women's relationship commitment. For example, Lydon and his colleagues (Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999) found that women protected their relationships by devaluing an attractive and available person of the opposite sex if they were moderately committed to the relationship, whereas men only devalued the attractive alternative if they were highly committed to the relationship. Thus, dating women, who generally identify with their relationships, might be more similar to married men than to dating men in their relationship commitment.

Consequently, women may be more motivated than are men to engage in behaviors that benefit the best interests of the relationship. Indeed, dating women typically respond to relationship threats from a relationship perspective, whereas dating men respond to similar threats from a more individualistic perspective (Lydon, 1999). Specifically, when faced with the threatening presence of an attractive and available person of the opposite sex, dating women were found to increase their accommodative response to their partners' transgressions. That is, women perceived their alternatives as a threat to the relationship and responded in a way to protect it. However, when placed in a similar situation, dat-

ing men were found to be less tolerant of their partners' transgressions. In other words, men were not motivated to protect their relationships by accommodating their partners' misbehaviors when they were tempted by the presence of an attractive alternative.

Overall, we propose that individuals exhibit pro-relationship behaviors if they identify with and thus commit to their relationships. Whereas for women we expect this process at the dispositional level, for men, we theorize that it operates at a relationship-specific level. Women are more relational at a dispositional level. As a group, women's self-construals are oriented toward their connections with others (e.g., see Cross & Madson, 1997, for a review). Therefore, when women are in relationships with others, their identity is at stake, they are committed, and thus they engage in relationship maintenance responses (see Cross et al., 2000). For men, identification and commitment may be more relationship specific. Dispositionally, men are more individualistic and less relational. Men's self-construals are less oriented toward their general relationships than are the self-construals of women (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Cross et al., 2000; Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002). Consequently, they should only show relationship maintenance responses when they identify and thus commit to their specific relationships. Hence, we theorized that for men, increased commitment signals a shift from self-serving interests to relationship-serving interests.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP ILLUSIONS

One of the most sweeping and general relationship maintenance responses is to see one's romantic partner more positively than what is warranted by reality. For example, the majority of both dating and married intimates see their partners more positively than the average partner, even if it is logically impossible for the majority to have a partner who is above average in terms of their interpersonal characteristics (Murray et al., 1996a; Murray & Holmes, 1997). Dating and married intimates even see their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions (Murray et al., 1996a). Such results are remarkable given that the partner's self-perceptions are bound to be inflated by positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Because relationship illusions fuel relationship satisfaction and relationship survival (Murray et al., 1996b), they serve a relationship maintenance function. Therefore, similar to other pro-relationship behaviors, relationship illusions should be more likely to occur when one identifies with and thus commits to the relationship. Although the association between identification and relationship illusions has not yet been demonstrated, commitment has been found to be associated with relationship illusions. For example, Martz and his colleagues

(1998) found that commitment predicted the extent to which people saw their relationships as being better than other people's relationships, including their best friends' relationships. This link between commitment and relationship illusions appears to be most pronounced when intimates are faced with a relationship threat (Gagné & Lydon, 2001; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000).

Despite the overall robustness of relationship illusions, gender differences have been found. In a cross-sectional study (Murray et al., 1996a), dating women perceived their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions. However, dating men did not exhibit such relationship illusions. Admittedly, one reason why dating men failed to exhibit relationship illusions might have been because dating women's self-perceptions were overly positive, thus making it more difficult for the men to see their dating partners even more positively. However, comparing these results with additional results obtained from married couples suggests that the reason why dating men did not exhibit relationship illusions might have been because they were not sufficiently committed to their relationships. Whereas both dating and married women perceived their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions, these relationship illusions were only displayed by married men, not by less structurally committed dating men. Given this, we propose that commitment might matter more for men's relationship illusions than for women's relationship illusions.

Further work conducted by Murray et al. (1996b) also suggests that commitment may be more critical for men's relationship illusions than it is for women's relationship illusions. In a 1-year longitudinal study, dating men did not initially perceive their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions. Instead, they only came to exhibit such relationship illusions 1 year later, at the end of the study. Dating men whose relationships were still intact at the end of the year were likely more committed than the ones whose relationships dissolved. This would be consistent with previous work showing that intimates high in commitment are more likely to maintain their relationships (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997; Rusbult, 1983). Moreover, it is likely that dating men's commitment increased over time. Hence, dating men may have displayed relationship illusions at year's end because of higher commitment at the end of the study than at the beginning of the study. However, dating women perceived their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions both at the beginning and at the end of the study. Thus, dating women may have displayed relationship illusions whether they were low or high in commitment.

Overall, these results are consistent with previous work showing that the association between commitment and relationship maintenance responses differ between men and women (e.g., Lydon et al., 1999). Because of their general relational nature, women should show relationship illusions, irrespective of relationship-specific identification and commitment. Men, on the other hand, are less relational at a general dispositional level. They may only show relationship illusions when they identify with and thus commit to their specific relationships.

OVERVIEW OF OBJECTIVES

Our objectives were fivefold. First, we sought to replicate the gender difference Murray and her colleagues (1996a, 1996b) found in their two previous studies. Second, we investigated commitment as a potential moderator of this gender difference in relationship illusions. Men high in commitment were expected to perceive their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions. In contrast, men low in commitment were expected to see their partners less positively than their partners' self-perceptions because their partners' motivation to self-enhance (Taylor & Brown, 1988) may very well exceed their own motivation to see their partners in a favorable light. In contrast, we expected women to view their partners more positively than their partners' self-views independent of their own relationship commitment.

Third, we investigated relationship-specific identification as a moderator of the gender difference in relationship illusions. Specifically, we predicted that relationship-specific identification would be related to relationship illusions in men and not in women. Men may need to identify with their specific relationships to think in the best interest of their relationships and show relationship illusions. Therefore, men high in relationship-specific identification were expected to see their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions. The opposite pattern of results was expected for men low in relationship-specific identification. However, women should think in the best interest of their relationships and show relationship illusions irrespective of their relationship-specific identification given that they identify with relationships at a more general level. Hence, we expected women to view their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions independent of their specific identification with the relationship.

Fourth, we further investigated whether commitment would explain the link between relationship-specific identification and relationship illusions among men. In line with Lydon's (1996) theorizing about commitment, relationship-specific identification was expected to predict higher commitment, which in turn was expected to

predict higher relationship illusions in men. Finally, we also wanted to show that it was commitment and not related constructs such as satisfaction that were moderators of the gender difference in relationship illusions or mediators of the relation between identification and relationship illusions.

Two studies were conducted to test for a gender difference in relationship illusions. In Study 1, we also investigated whether relationship commitment, and not satisfaction, would moderate this gender difference in relationship illusions. In Study 2, we then tested relationship-specific identification as a moderator of the gender difference in relationship illusions, and we tested whether commitment would mediate the effects of relationship-specific identification for men. In this way, we could consider more fully the idea that men in dating relationships do not exhibit relationship illusions until they identify with and thus commit to their romantic relationships. Study 2 also tested satisfaction as a moderator of the gender difference in relationship illusions and as a mediator of the association between relationship-specific identification and relationship illusions.

STUDY 1

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Dating students were initially recruited in several introductory-level courses at McGill University. They and their partners were later contacted to participate in a 20-min study designed to investigate thoughts and feelings in close relationships. The final sample comprised 47 heterosexual couples age 20.4 years ($M_{\text{men}} = 21$ years; $M_{\text{women}} = 19.7$ years) who had been dating 81 weeks on average (range = 3 to 288 weeks). Of the 47 relationships, 44 were exclusive, whereas 3 were casual; 8 couples were living together and 1 was engaged.

Partners arrived at the laboratory together and were invited to take a seat in two separate testing rooms where they completed the questionnaires individually. Dyads received \$10 Canadian for their participation.

MATERIALS

The main focus of the questionnaires was to assess relationship illusions via perceptions of partner versus partner's self-perceptions and to assess relationship variables that might be associated with these illusions (commitment and satisfaction).

Interpersonal qualities scale. Murray et al.'s (1996a) 21-item interpersonal qualities scale was used to assess participants' self-perceptions and their partners' perceptions of them. The scale comprises 10 positive attributes (e.g., kind and affectionate) and 11 negative attributes (e.g., lazy). Participants rated how well each trait

described them and their partners on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic*; 9 = *completely characteristic*). Negative attributes were reverse-scored so that all items could be aggregated to form an index of self-perceptions and an index of perceptions of the partner, with higher scores representing more positive perceptions. Following exactly from Murray et al. (1996a), relationship illusions were indexed by comparing mean differences between perceptions of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions.

Relationship commitment. Nine items were selected to measure commitment. Four items were from the Lydon et al. (1997) moral commitment factor. Participants rated the extent they felt (1) committed, (2) obligated, (3) attached, and (4) a sense of duty toward their relationships. Four items were from the Lydon et al. enthusiastic commitment factor. Participants rated the extent they (1) enjoyed their relationships, (2) felt enthusiastic and (3) not burdened by their relationships, and (4) would not feel relieved if their relationships were to end. Answers were recorded on a 9-point scale where 1 equaled *not at all* and 9 equaled *extremely*. One item was derived from Rusbult's (1983) commitment measure and asked respondents to estimate how long they expected their relationships to last on a scale of 1 (*a week or so*) to 9 (*decades*).

A factor analysis (varimax rotation) including the nine commitment items revealed a two-factor solution with exceptionally high loadings ($> .60$). Two moral commitment items, duty and obligation, loaded on a different factor than the factor loaded on by the other seven items. Moreover, duty and obligation did not correlate significantly with the rest of the items ($r_s < \pm .21$) and their corrected item-total correlations were weaker than .28. This is consistent with previous work showing that duty and obligation might be less associated with commitment and more associated with burden during times of relationship stability (Lydon et al., 1997). Hence, we excluded duty and obligation when creating the aggregated relationship commitment score. Higher scores represented higher commitment.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using Murray et al.'s (1996a) three-item measure combined with three items from Davis and Oathout's (1987) modified version of the Marital Adjustment Scale. For example, participants rated "I am extremely happy in my relationship" on a scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 9 (*almost always*). Items were aggregated so that higher scores represented higher satisfaction.

Results

Table 1 displays inter-item reliabilities, means, and standard deviations broken down by gender for self-

perceptions, perceptions of partner, commitment, and satisfaction. Table 2 displays the correlations between each measure for men and women. Note that none of the measures exhibited ceiling effects and that the variance between men and women on these measures did not significantly differ.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

To address whether women were more likely than were men to distort their partners' virtues in a systematically positive way, we employed the same analytical strategy as Murray and her colleagues (1996a). That is, we performed a 2 (relationship illusions: perceptions of partner vs. partner's self-perceptions) \times 2 (gender: female vs. male) repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the couple as the unit of analysis. A main effect of relationship illusions revealed that respondents' perceptions of their partners ($M = 6.66$) were significantly more positive than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.28$), $F(1, 45) = 21.89$, $\eta^2 = .57$, $p < .001$.¹ However, consistent with Murray et al. (1996a), this effect was qualified by an interaction with gender, $F(1, 45) = 13.85$, $\eta^2 = .48$, $p = .001$. One-tailed t tests revealed that women's perceptions of their partners ($M = 6.99$) were significantly more positive than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.20$), $t(45) = 5.09$, $r = .60$, $p < .001$, but that men's perceptions of their partners ($M = 6.33$) did not significantly differ from their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.36$), $t < -1$.

Additional paired t tests revealed that women had significantly more positive perceptions of their partners than did men, $t(46) = 5.68$, $p < .001$. Women tended to be more satisfied and committed than were men, but these effects were marginal, $t_{\text{satisfaction}}(46) = 1.96$, $p = .06$, and $t_{\text{commitment}}(45) = 1.80$, $p = .08$. Finally, unlike Murray et al. (1996a), women and men in this sample did not differ in their ratings of self-perceptions, $t < 1$, eliminating the possibility that, compared to women, men failed to perceive their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions because of their female partners' overly positive self-regard.

MODERATORS OF THE GENDER \times RELATIONSHIP ILLUSIONS EFFECT

We then investigated whether relationship appraisals such as relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction influenced this Gender \times Relationship Illusions interaction. Men's commitment was expected to interact with their relationship illusions so that men would perceive their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions only if they were high in commitment. Men's satisfaction was not expected to interact with their relationship illusions. Finally, women were expected to perceive their partners more positively than their part-

TABLE 1: Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations for Self-Perceptions, Partner Perceptions, Commitment, and Satisfaction for Men and Women in Study 1

	α	Men		Women	
		M	SD	M	SD
Perceptions of self	.82	6.20 _a	0.79	6.36 _a	0.78
Perceptions of partner	.77	6.30 _a	0.89	7.00 _b	0.78
Commitment	.87	7.41 _a	1.24	7.73 _a	1.06
Satisfaction	.87	7.18 _a	1.40	7.56 _a	1.28

NOTE: Means not sharing the same subscript are significantly different at .05.

ners' self-perceptions whether they were high or low in commitment or satisfaction.

To test our hypotheses, we first performed median splits on men's and women's commitment and satisfaction to create low—versus high—relationship appraisal groups. We then conducted a four-way mixed ANOVA with relationship illusions (perceptions of partner vs. partner's self-perceptions) and gender (men vs. women) as the within-couple variables and men's and women's relationship appraisals (low vs. high commitment or satisfaction) as the between-couple variables. This allowed us to look at the three-way interactions between men's (women's) relationship appraisals, relationship illusions, and gender (his illusions vs. her illusions). The three-way interactions were followed by planned comparisons testing the two-way interactions between relationship appraisals and own relationship illusions.²

We hypothesized a significant three-way interaction between men's commitment, gender, and relationship illusions suggesting that gender differences in relationship illusions vary according to men's commitment. We further predicted that planned comparisons would reveal that the locus of the three-way interaction would be due to differences between high and low commitment men in their relationship illusions.

Relationship commitment. We first performed a four-way mixed ANOVA including relationship illusions, gender, men's, and women's commitment. This analysis revealed a main effect of relationship illusions, $F(1, 41) = 24.01$, $\eta^2 = .61$, $p < .001$, that was again qualified by an interaction with gender, $F(1, 41) = 18.75$, $\eta^2 = .56$, $p < .001$.

As predicted, a three-way interaction revealed that men's commitment did influence this interaction between relationship illusions and gender, $F(1, 41) = 11.28$, $\eta^2 = .46$, $p < .01$. Planned comparisons further revealed that men's commitment interacted with their own relationship illusions, $F(1, 43) = 9.65$, $\eta^2 = .43$, $p < .01$. As hypothesized, men low in commitment perceived their partners less positively ($M = 5.96$) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.45$), $t(43) = -2.33$, $r = -.33$, p

TABLE 2: Zero-Order Correlations Between Women's and Men's Perceptions of Self and of Partner, Relationship Commitment, and Relationship Satisfaction (Study 1)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Women's self-perceptions	—							
2. Women's view of partner	.53**	—						
3. Women's commitment	.39**	.58**	—					
4. Women's satisfaction	.45**	.65**	.82**	—				
5. Men's self-perceptions	.07	.47**	.35*	.33*	—			
6. Men's view of partner	.25	.50**	.62*	.61**	.48**	—		
7. Men's commitment	-.11	.20	.47**	.45**	.35*	.59**	—	
8. Men's satisfaction	-.02	.29*	.37*	.50**	.27	.54**	.81**	—

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

$< .05$. In contrast, men high in commitment perceived their partners ($M = 6.66$) more positively than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.27$), $t(43) = 2.05$, $r = .30$, $p < .05$.

There also was a three-way interaction with women's commitment level, relationship illusions, and gender, $F(1, 41) = 5.48$, $\eta^2 = .34$, $p < .05$. Surprisingly, a more focused test of this interaction revealed that women's commitment interacted with their own relationship illusions, $F(1, 43) = 4.26$, $\eta^2 = .30$, $p < .05$. The nature of this two-way interaction was that high-commitment women showed more illusions than did low-commitment women. Nonetheless, as predicted, both women low and high in commitment perceived their partners more positively ($M_s = 6.69$ and 7.32 , respectively) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M_s = 6.13$ and 6.28 , respectively), $t_s(43) = 3.52$ and 6.12 , respectively, $r_s = .47$ and $.68$, respectively, $p_s < .001$.

There was not a significant difference in the magnitude of the two-way interactions between commitment and relationship illusions for men and women, $Z = .67$, ns , despite the fact that the interaction with men's commitment accounted for twice as much variance in men's illusions as women's commitment accounted for in women's illusions. Finally, the four-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, men's commitment, and women's commitment was not significant, $F < 1$.

Relationship satisfaction. The four-way mixed ANOVA including relationship illusions, gender, men's relationship satisfaction, and women's relationship satisfaction again yielded a main effect of relationship illusions, $F(1, 42) = 30.35$, $\eta^2 = .65$, $p < .001$, that was qualified by an interaction with gender, $F(1, 42) = 10.89$, $\eta^2 = .45$, $p = .002$.

However, the three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and men's satisfaction was not significant, $F < 1$. Planned comparisons testing the interaction between men's illusions and their own satisfaction revealed that men's relationship illusions did not vary according to their own satisfaction, $F < 1$.

The three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and women's satisfaction also was not significant, $F < 1$. However, consistent with results for women's commitment, planned comparisons revealed that women's relationship illusions interacted with their satisfaction, $F(1, 44) = 6.47$, $\eta^2 = .36$, $p < .05$. Again, women high in satisfaction showed more relationship illusions than did women low in relationship satisfaction. Nonetheless, both women low and high in satisfaction perceived their partners more positively ($M_s = 6.60$ and 7.45 , respectively) than their partners' self-perceptions, ($M_s = 6.07$ and 6.36 , respectively), $t_s(44) = 3.53$ and 6.63 , $r_s = .47$ and $.71$, respectively, $p_s < .001$.

Finally, the four-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, men's satisfaction, and women's satisfaction was not significant, $F < 1$.

Discussion

Study 1 supported the hypothesis that commitment interacts with men's relationship illusions. Men high in commitment exaggerated their partners' virtues compared to their partners' self-perceptions. However, men low in commitment viewed their partners less positively than their partners' self-perceptions, presumably because their partners' motivation to see themselves in a favorable light (Taylor & Brown, 1988) well exceeded their own motivation to enhance their partners. In contrast, women both low and high in commitment enhanced their partners compared to their partners' self-perceptions.

For pro-relationship behaviors to occur, people need to be motivated to let go of their self-centered needs and to think of the good of the relationship (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). For men, commitment is necessary for them to make this shift and to show relationship illusions. For women, this shift is not necessary for them to have relationship illusions. This suggests that women tend to be more relationship oriented than are men. This also suggests qualitative differences between men's and women's relationship commitment. Low-commitment

women are more like high-commitment men than like low-commitment men.

We did not find relationship satisfaction to moderate gender differences in relationship illusions. This suggests that commitment and satisfaction play different roles in the relationship, even if they traditionally have been found to correlate highly—with correlations ranging from .50 to .80 (Rusbult, 1991). In the present study, the correlation between commitment and satisfaction was .81 for men and .82 for women. This is not surprising given that our measure included items specifically designed by Lydon et al. (1997) to tap into personal commitment, a satisfaction-based form of commitment (M. P. Johnson, 1991). Nonetheless, whether men enhanced their partners compared to their partners' self-views was found to be a matter of commitment and not a matter of satisfaction.

STUDY 2

We conducted a second study to replicate the findings we obtained in Study 1 using a larger and slightly older sample. However, the relationship commitment measure used in this second study was less satisfaction based than the one used in Study 1. Again, relationship commitment—not satisfaction—was expected to moderate gender differences in relationship illusions.

A key purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether identification with the relationship would moderate gender differences in relationship illusions in the same way as does commitment. People who identify their sense of self with their relationships are more likely to think and act in the best interest of their relationships (Cross et al., 2000, Study 2). In general, women identify with their interpersonal relationships and should be motivated to engage in pro-relationship behaviors. Men are less likely to tie their sense of self to personal relationships in general (Cross et al., 2000). Instead, men's relational sense of self may more likely develop at the relationship-specific level. For example, with time and growing interdependence, men may come to adopt their dating partners' "characteristics," "resources," and "perspectives" (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Overall, relationship-specific identification should lead to more relationship illusions in men but not in women, who instead show relationship illusions because they identify with their relationships more generally.

The more men come to identify with their relationships, the more they should feel committed to their relationships (Lydon, 1996). Greater commitment, in turn, should motivate them to think in terms of what is good for the relationship, and thus to engage in pro-relationship behavior and thinking (Lydon et al., 1997). Therefore, we not only expected identification to moderate the gender difference in relationship illusions but

we also expected that the effect of identification would be mediated by commitment, but not by satisfaction.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Dating students from one of three Canadian universities (McGill University, Concordia University, and Université de Moncton) were initially recruited four ways. Some were recruited after completing an unrelated laboratory experiment or following an announcement made in upper-level classes. Others were recruited by placing advertisements in student newspapers or by electronically mailing letters describing the study to all senior students in the Faculties of Arts and of Science at McGill University. Both students and their dating partners received a questionnaire packet to be completed in the privacy of their own home. Students received their packets directly from one of the investigators or by mail, whereas their partners received their packets directly from the student partners or by mail. Questionnaire packets comprised an invitation letter to participate that further requested that all material be completed individually, a consent form, the questionnaires, and a return envelope with paid postage. Participants were telephoned up to three times following their receipt of their packets as a reminder to return their completed questionnaires as soon as possible.

Of the 177 couples who initially received the questionnaire packets, both members of 105 dyads returned their completed questionnaires. One member of 26 dyads and both members of 46 dyads did not return their questionnaires.

The final sample comprised 105 couples age 22.2 years ($M_{\text{men}} = 22.8$ years; $M_{\text{women}} = 21.7$ years) who had been dating 114 weeks on average (range = 11 to 367 weeks). Eight couples were living together, 12 were engaged, and the remaining 85 were dating. Overall, three women considered their relationships to be casual, whereas all men considered their relationships to be exclusive. Each participant received \$5 Canadian and was included in one of two \$100 Canadian lotteries for their participation.

MATERIALS

Questionnaires took approximately 1 hour to complete because they were originally designed for a study on life transitions asking questions about personal decisions, social support, stress, personality, and health. Also embedded in the questionnaires were relationship-specific measures assessing perceptions of self and of the partner, relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, and identification with the relationship.

Modified interpersonal qualities scale. To measure participants' perceptions of self and of their partners, we used

nine items from Murray et al.'s (1996a) Interpersonal Qualities Scale (i.e., kind and affectionate, patient, understanding, critical and judgmental, controlling and dominant, distant, complaining, self-assured, and intelligent) combined with three items from Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon's (1994) Self-Attribute Questionnaire (i.e., socially competent, physically attractive, and emotionally stable). Participants rated how well each trait described them and their partners on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic*, 9 = *completely characteristic*). Negative attributes were reverse scored, and all items were aggregated to form an index of self-perceptions and an index of partner/perceptions, with higher scores representing perceptions that were more positive.

Relationship commitment. Relationship commitment was assessed using the McGill Assessment of Relationship Commitment (i.e., the MARC), a six-item measure of global relationship commitment previously found in four datasets to have good internal consistency, predictive validity of relationship dissolution, and discriminant validity when comparing it to relationship satisfaction (Lydon & Gagné, 2001). Participants were asked the extent to which they felt committed, attached, invested, devoted, loyal, and dedicated to their relationship on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*completely*). Items were aggregated so that higher scores represented higher levels of commitment.

Relationship identification. Most measures of relationship identification assess individuals' general tendency to tie their sense of self with their relationships (see Cross et al., 2000). However, we hypothesized that men's illusions would depend on their identification with their specific relationships, in this case, their romantic relationships. When Cross and her colleagues (2000, 2002) discuss relational identity at the dispositional level, they usually contrast this with identification at the relationship-specific level by pointing to the work on the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) (Aron et al., 1991; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), the rationale being that people who are high in relationship-specific identification should be more likely to incorporate their partners' "perspectives," "resources," and "characteristics" into their self-construal (Aron et al., 1991). Therefore, we used Aron et al.'s (1992) IOS Scale to assess relationship-specific identification. Participants were presented with seven pairs of increasingly overlapping circles, one marked self and one marked other, and were asked to choose the pair of circles that best represented their relationships.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using a single-item version of the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). Known as Magical Item 31, this item has been found to correlate highly with the total scale ($r = .67$ to $.73$) and is argued to

be a good indicator of overall satisfaction in the relationship (Goodwin, 1992). Specifically, participants were instructed to circle the point that best described the degree of happiness, everything considered, in their relationships using a 7-point response scale. The middle point, "happy," represented the degree of happiness that most people get from their relationships. The extreme right side of the scale represented those few people who experienced extreme joy in their relationships, whereas the extreme left side of the scale represented those who were extremely unhappy in their relationships.

Results

The inter-item reliabilities, means, and standard deviations broken down by gender for self-perceptions, perceptions of partner, commitment, satisfaction, and identification with the relationship are displayed in Table 3. Table 4 displays the correlations between each measure for men and women. Note that none of the measures exhibited ceiling effects. Moreover, the variance in self-perceptions, perceptions of partner, satisfaction, and identification with the relationship did not differ between men and women. However, the variance in women's commitment was significantly greater than the variance in men's commitment.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

To investigate whether respondents displayed gender differences in relationship illusions, we first performed a 2 (relationship illusions: perceptions of partner vs. partner's self-perceptions) \times 2 (gender: female vs. male) repeated-measures ANOVA with the couple as the unit of analysis. Respondents' perceptions of their partners ($M = 7.17$) were significantly more positive than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 7.00$), $F(1, 102) = 10.43$, $\eta^2 = .30$, $p = .002$. This effect was again qualified by an interaction with gender, $F(1, 102) = 11.71$, $\eta^2 = .32$, $p = .001$. One-tailed t tests revealed that women's perceptions of their partners ($M = 7.43$) were significantly more positive than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.96$), $t(102) = 3.92$, $r = .36$, $p < .001$, but that men's perceptions of their partners ($M = 6.90$) did not differ from their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 7.03$), $t(102) = -1.08$, $r = -.11$, ns .

Additional paired t tests revealed that women had significantly more positive perceptions of their partners than did their male partners, $t(102) = 5.04$, $p < .001$. However, women did not differ from their male partners in their identification with the relationship, commitment, or satisfaction, $t_s < 1.11$. Finally, consistent with Study 1, women and men did not differ in their ratings of self-perceptions, $t < 1$, suggesting that men, compared to women, did not fail to enhance their partners because of their partners' exceptionally high self-regard.

TABLE 3: Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations for Self-Perceptions, Partner Perceptions, Commitment, Satisfaction, and Identification for Men and Women in Study 2

	α	Men		Women	
		M	SD	M	SD
Perceptions of self	.74	6.96 _a	0.90	7.02 _a	0.80
Perceptions of partner	.74	6.90 _a	0.90	7.43 _b	0.83
Commitment	.91	7.92 _a	0.90	8.02 _a	1.22
Satisfaction	—	5.42 _a	0.98	5.43 _a	0.95
Identification	—	5.30 _a	1.18	5.14 _a	1.16

NOTE: Means not sharing the same subscript are significantly different at .001.

MODERATORS OF THE GENDER \times ILLUSIONS EFFECT

We then investigated whether relationship appraisals such as commitment, identification with the relationship, and satisfaction influenced the Gender \times Relationship illusions interaction using the same data analytic strategy as the one used in Study 1.

Relationship commitment. We first performed a four-way mixed ANOVA with relationship illusions, gender, men's commitment, and women's commitment. This analysis revealed a main effect of relationship illusions, $F(1, 98) = 12.64$, $\eta^2 = .34$, $p < .001$, that was again qualified by an interaction with gender, $F(1, 98) = 10.23$, $\eta^2 = .31$, $p = .002$. These effects remained significant whether the overall four-way interaction included commitment, identification with the relationship, or satisfaction.

As in Study 1, the three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and men's commitment was significant, $F(1, 98) = 10.70$, $\eta^2 = .31$, $p = .001$. As predicted, planned comparisons revealed that men's relationship illusions interacted with their own commitment, $F(1, 100) = 12.07$, $\eta^2 = .33$, $p = .001$. Specifically, men low in commitment perceived their partners less positively ($M = 6.63$) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 7.08$), $t(100) = -3.22$, $r = -.31$, $p < .01$, one-tailed. In contrast, men high in commitment perceived their partners ($M = 7.20$) more positively than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.96$), $t(100) = 1.68$, $r = .17$, $p < .05$, one-tailed.³

Unlike Study 1, however, the three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and women's commitment was not significant, $F(1, 98) = 1.53$, $\eta^2 = .12$, *ns*. Planned comparisons revealed that, as expected, women's relationship illusions did not interact with their own commitment, $F < 1$. Both women low and high in commitment perceived their partners more positively ($M_s = 7.15$ and 7.64 , respectively) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M_s = 6.80$ and 7.07 , respectively).

In addition, the magnitude for the interaction between women's commitment and their relationship illusions was smaller than the magnitude for the interaction between men's commitment and their relationship illusions, $Z = 1.55$, $p < .06$. Finally, the four-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, men's commitment, and women's commitment was not significant, $F < 1$.

Relationship identification. The four-way mixed ANOVA between gender, relationship illusions, men's identification with the relationship, and women's identification with the relationship yielded a significant three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and men's identification with the relationship, $F(1, 99) = 12.51$, $\eta^2 = .33$, $p = .001$. Planned comparisons revealed that, as predicted, men's identification interacted with their own relationship illusions, $F(1, 101) = 5.53$, $\eta^2 = .23$, $p < .05$. Men low in relationship identification perceived their partners less positively ($M = 6.80$) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 7.16$), $t(101) = -2.57$, $r = -.25$, $p < .01$, one-tailed. Although in the right direction, men high in relationship identification did not perceive their partners more positively ($M = 7.01$) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M = 6.89$), $t < 1$, $r = .08$.

The three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and women's relationship identification was not significant, $F < 1$. Planned comparisons further revealed that women's relationship illusions did not interact with how much they identified with the relationship, $F < 1$. Both women low and high in identification with the relationship perceived their partners more positively ($M_s = 7.34$ and 7.57 , respectively) than their partners' self-perceptions ($M_s = 6.86$ and 7.11 , respectively).

The magnitude for the interaction between women's identification with the relationship and their relationship illusions was significantly smaller than the magnitude for the interaction between men's identification with the relationship and their relationship illusions, $Z = 1.63$, $p = .05$. Finally, the four-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, men's identification, and women's identification was not significant, $F < 1$.

Relationship satisfaction. We then conducted the four-way mixed ANOVA with gender, relationship illusions, men's relationship satisfaction, and women's relationship satisfaction. As in Study 1, the three-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and men's satisfaction was not significant, and neither was the interaction between relationship illusions, gender, and women's satisfaction, both $F_s < 1$. As expected, planned comparisons revealed that men's and women's relationship illusions did not vary according to their own satisfaction, both $F_s < 1.73$. Finally, the four-way interaction between relationship illusions, gender, men's

TABLE 4: Zero-Order Correlations Between Women's and Men's Perceptions of Self and of Partner, Relationship Commitment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Identification With the Relationship (Study 2)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Women's self-perceptions	—									
2. Women's view of partner	.50**	—								
3. Women's commitment	.26**	.30**	—							
4. Women's satisfaction	.38**	.37**	.49**	—						
5. Women's identification	.21*	.32**	.51**	.36**	—					
6. Men's self-perceptions	.12	.34**	.38**	.16	.24*	—				
7. Men's view of partner	.22*	.24*	.30**	.17	.30**	.52**	—			
8. Men's commitment	-.07	.11	.36**	.15	.29**	.32**	.32**	—		
9. Men's satisfaction	.23*	.20*	.38**	.29**	.32**	.41**	.37**	.34**	—	
10. Men's identification	-.17	-.00	.24*	.10	.28**	.25**	.14	.36**	.34**	—

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

satisfaction, and women's satisfaction was not significant, $F < 1$.

MEDIATIONAL ANALYSES

We investigated the potential mediating role of relationship commitment in accounting for the association between men's identification with the relationship and their relationship illusions. First, men's commitment was related to relationship identification, $r_s = .36$, $p < .001$. This supports the prediction that men would be more committed the more they identified with their relationships. When covarying out commitment, the interaction between men's relationship identification and their relationship illusions was no longer significant, $F < 1$, with a 61% reduction in the effect size.⁴ This suggests that, as predicted, the positive association between identification and illusions for men was mediated by men's commitment. Further analyses revealed that satisfaction was not a mediator of men's identification to their relationships and their relationship illusions. Moreover, when covarying out identification, the interaction between men's commitment and their relationship illusions remained significant, $F(1, 100) = 7.73$, $p < .01$. Finally, the interaction between men's relationship illusions and their commitment remained significant when controlling for satisfaction, $F(1, 100) = 10.11$, $p < .01$.

Given that there were no significant effects of commitment or identification with relationship illusions for women, we did not test for mediation. However, women's commitment was related to their identification with the relationship, $r = .51$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 2 first investigated potential moderators of gender differences in relationship illusions. Support again was found for the hypothesis that commitment is one of the reasons for the gender difference in relationship illusions. As in Study 1, commitment interacted with men's relationship illusions so that only men high in commit-

ment enhanced their partners' virtues compared to their partners' self-views. Those low in commitment perceived their partners more negatively than their partners' self-perceptions. In contrast, women showed relationship illusions whether they were low or high in commitment.

Similarly, we found that identification with the relationship interacted with men's but not women's relationship illusions. However, whereas only men low in identification saw their partners less positively than their partners' self-perceptions, men high in identification did not see their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions. In contrast, women showed relationship illusions irrespective of their identification with the relationship.

As expected, relationship satisfaction did not play a role in determining whether dating men would exhibit relationship illusions. Of interest, the correlation between commitment and satisfaction in the present study was .34 for men and .49 for women—lower than that found in the first study. This suggests that the measure used in Study 2 was less satisfaction based than the one used in Study 1. However, these lower associations also might be due to differences in the composition of the samples in the two studies. In Study 2, couples were about to experience the life transition of graduating from university, a time when they might be more likely to make appraisals of their relationship commitment that are differentiated from their overall positive feelings about the relationship (Lydon et al., 1997).

Critically, Study 2 then showed that commitment, not satisfaction, mediated the link between dating men's identification to the relationship and the positive nature of their relationship distortions. The more dating men identified with their dating relationships, the more they were committed. Commitment, in turn, was associated with relationship illusions. These results are consistent with recent conceptualizations of commitment that describe it as a motivational expression of goals that

define the self (Lydon, 1996). Overall, people feel committed to relationships they identify with, and this commitment motivates them to act and think in ways to protect and maintain their relationships.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Men, as opposed to women, do not generally perceive more virtues in their dating partners than their partners see in themselves. Four studies now show such gender differences in relationship illusions, two of which were reported by Murray et al. (1996a, 1996b) and two of which we report here. In this research, we advanced an explanation for this gender difference by demonstrating that the reason why men fail to exhibit relationship illusions is a matter of committing to a relationship that expresses one's identity.

Whether low or high in relationship commitment, women were motivated to see the absolute best in their dating partners. Men only did so if they were high in commitment. Although women and men did not differ significantly in their self-reported levels of commitment (see also Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995), women who were low in commitment might have been qualitatively more like men high in commitment than like those low in commitment. That is, even though men and women appeared equally committed to their relationships, gender differences were detected in terms of commitment's association with relationship illusions.

Pro-relationship behaviors occur if individuals are able to put the relationship ahead of their self-interests. Generally oriented toward their personal relationships, women do not need to make the shift from self-interest to relationship interest to show relationship illusions. However, men are less likely to think of themselves as interdependent with their personal relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997) and are less likely to depart from their self-interests for the good of these relationships (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). For example, men not only believe that they have better alternatives to the relationship (Attridge et al., 1995) but they also become less tolerant of their partners' misbehaviors if they feel tempted by an attractive alternative (Lydon, 1999). For them to show relationship illusions (or other pro-relationship behaviors), they need to transcend their self-interests to think about what is best for the relationship.

The present work revealed that some men do identify with their dating partners. Men who included their dating partners into their sense of self did not perceive their partners more negatively than their partners' self-perceptions. This suggests that relational interdependence might operate at two different levels: at the general level and at the relationship-specific level. Women were recently found to be more oriented toward interdependence at the general level than were men (Cross

et al., 2000). However, men may be just as likely as women to consider a specific relationship-partner (mother, friend, or lover) as part of who they are. Indeed, present and previous work (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001) found no gender differences in the extent to which dating couples include their romantic partners into their selves. When relationship interdependence operates at the general level (and it does for women), it may overshadow individual differences at the relationship-specific level. Because most men's interdependence does not operate at the general level, variability in relationship-specific interdependence was found to be more indicative of men's than of women's pro-relationship thinking.

And so, men's specific identification with their romantic relationships is associated with their relationship illusions. Moreover, men's commitment was found to mediate the association between men's relationship-specific identification and their relationship illusions. As previously theorized (Lydon, 1996), men in the present study were highly committed if they felt that their relationships reflected their self-identities. Moreover, this commitment motivated them to idealize their partners as indicated by their relationship illusions. Presumably, similar effects would be obtained with other pro-relationship behaviors. Thus, men's identification with the relationship should lead to greater commitment, and this commitment should in turn provoke greater accommodation of their partners' misbehaviors and devaluation of alluring relationship alternatives.

In interpreting our results, one also must keep in mind that the correlational nature of the design cannot address (1) whether men show relationship illusions because they are committed or (2) whether men are committed because they have adopted relationship illusions. Previous experimental work on relationship maintenance suggests that people engage in pro-relationship behavior because of commitment (e.g., D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Lydon et al., 1999). Previous work also shows that relationship illusions are boosted once people have committed themselves to a specific goal (Gagné & Lydon, 2001). Hence, it is likely that men in our study showed relationship illusions because they were committed to their relationships. However, further work involving a manipulation of commitment followed by a measure of relationship illusions is needed to directly address this question of causality.

It is also important to point out that gender differences in relationship illusions appear to be limited to comparisons between perceptions of the partner and the partner's self-perceptions (see Murray & Holmes, 1997, for an exception). When perceptions of the partner are compared to a more ambiguous target such as the average dating partner, both genders show the bias.

Specifically, both women and men are motivated to see their dating partners more positively than the typical partner, whether comparisons are made directly—using a single scale with the midpoint representing the average partner (Gagné & Lydon, 2001)—or indirectly—using individual ratings of the partner and of the typical partner (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a). This lack of gender differences underscores the robustness of the better-than-average effect in the context of close relationships, an effect that pervades virtually all domains related to the self (e.g., Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). Nonetheless, that dating women differ from dating men in their propensity to see their partners more positively than their partners' self-perceptions seems to be robust as well.

Finally, further work also is needed to show which factors play a role in determining whether men in dating relationships will identify and commit to their relationships. Some men may be more oriented toward a relational identity than are others. For example, individual differences in the degree to which men's agency is more or less mitigated (Helgeson, 1994) might predict whether some are more likely than are others to consider their close relationships as part of their self-identities. An alternative explanation would be that men do possess communal motives but that such communal motives might be less accessible for men than they are for women. If this were the case, then simple priming of men's communal motives should increase their willingness to engage in pro-relationship behaviors. In the end, however, factors at the relationship-specific level might best contribute to variability in men's relational orientation. For example, men whose values and life goals are similar to that of their partners may be more likely to feel psychologically tied to their relationships.

CONCLUSION

Although for a long time, psychology and folk wisdom have cast women as more relational than men, recent theory and research has added substantially to this distinction (Cross et al., 2000, 2002; Cross & Madson, 1997). Consequently, a number of implications arise when considering differences in the social cognition of men and women. We have found that men can and do identify with their relational partners and that this is signaled by a shift in relationship commitment. In turn, commitment motivates men to exhibit relationship illusions. Women do not need to identify with the specific dating relationship to exhibit relationship illusions. Rather, their general, overarching relational identity puts in motion a set of social cognitive processes that are

only triggered in men at a lower, relationship-specific level. Women see the best in their relationships with others right from the start, whereas men do not do so until they commit to those relationships.

NOTES

1. Consistent with previous work (Martz et al., 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a), we did not find a gender difference when using perceptions of the typical partner to assess whether perceptions of the partner were positively distorted, $F < 1$.

2. The three-way interactions included information about how relationship appraisals interacted with own relationship illusions and with partner's relationship illusions. Although not the focus of the present research, we also looked at the two-way interactions between relationship appraisals and the partner's illusions. In neither study were women's appraisals associated with their male partners' illusions. That is, men's illusions were not associated with how committed, satisfied, or identified their partners were. In Study 1, relationship appraisals of men also were not associated with their female partners' illusions. Unexpectedly, in Study 2, men's appraisals were associated with their female partners' illusions (with the exception of satisfaction) such that men low on the various relationship appraisal measures had female partners with greater illusions than did men high on the relationship appraisal measures. A closer look at the means revealed that the reason for this was because men with low relationship appraisals rated themselves less positively than did men with high relationship appraisals, thus making it easier for the female partners of the low-appraisal men to show relationship illusions.

3. Similar results were obtained when using the same seven-item commitment measure as the one used in Study 1.

4. As recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), we also tested this mediation effect using a series of regression equations in which men's perceptions of their partners were the criterion, controlling for their female partners' self-perceptions. The four steps in establishing mediation were met. Men's identification with the relationship predicted their perceptions of their dating partners, controlling for their partners' self-perceptions, $S\beta = .18$, $t = 1.87$, $p = .03$, one-tailed. Men's commitment also predicted how they perceived their dating partners, controlling for their partners' self-perceptions, $S\beta = .39$, $t = 4.29$, $p < .001$, one-tailed. Men's relationship identification was associated with their commitment, $r = .36$, $p < .001$. The association between men's relationship identification and their perceptions of their partners, controlling for their partners' self-perceptions, was no longer significant when their commitment was taken under consideration, $S\beta = .03$, $t < 1$. However, the association between men's commitment and their perceptions of their partners, controlling for their partners' self-perceptions, remained significant when taking into consideration their identification with the relationship, $S\beta = .38$, $t = 3.79$, $p < .001$, one-tailed.

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