

Ideal Standards in Close Relationships: Their Structure and Functions

Garth J.O. Fletcher and Jeffrey A. Simpson¹

Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand (G.J.O.F.), and Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas (J.A.S.)

Abstract

This article describes the Ideals Standards Model, which deals with the content and functions of partner and relationship ideals in intimate relationships. This model proposes that there are three distinct categories of partner ideals (warmth-loyalty, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources), and that ideals have three distinct functions (evaluation, explanation, and regulation). The model also explains how perceived discrepancies between ideals and perceptions of one's current partner or relationship can have different consequences, depending on which of two motivating forces is active (the need to see the partner or relationship positively or the need to be accurate). Recent empirical studies that support some of the main features of the model are described.

Keywords

ideals; functions; discrepancies; relationships

How do people know whether they are in a good or a bad intimate

relationship? On what basis do people decide whether to become more involved, live together, get married, or look for another mate? One answer to such questions is that judgments about a particular relationship might be based on the consistency between ideal standards, on the one hand, and perceptions of the current partner or relationship, on the other. This idea is in common currency in folk wisdom but has received relatively little attention in the scientific literature. Our research and theoretical program over the past few years has confirmed that ideal standards do serve as pivotal knowledge structures in close relationships. However, it has also suggested that the psychological processes through which ideal standards operate are complex.

THE IDEALS STANDARDS MODEL

Relationship and partner ideals are central components of the social mind that people use to guide and regulate their interpersonal worlds. According to our Ideals Standards Model (Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, in press), partner and relationship ideals

may predate—and causally influence—important judgments and decisions in relationships. These ideals comprise three interlocking components: perceptions of the self, the partner, and the relationship. For example, a person's partner ideal of "handsome and warm" represents a personally held ideal that specifies what the individual hopes and desires (the self), describes a hypothetical other (the partner), and specifies what the ideal would be like in an intimate relationship with the self (the relationship).

According to our model, partner and relationship ideals should be based around three evaluative dimensions: (a) warmth, commitment, and intimacy; (b) health, passion, and attractiveness; and (c) status and resources. We derived these predictions from recent evolutionary models which suggest that each of these dimensions represents a different "route" to obtaining a mate and promoting one's own reproductive fitness (see Gangestad & Simpson, in press). For example, by being attentive to a partner's capacity for intimacy and commitment, an individual should increase his or her chances of finding a cooperative, committed partner who is likely to be a devoted parent. By focusing on attractiveness and health, an individual is likely to acquire a mate who is younger, healthier, and perhaps more fertile (especially in the case of men choosing women). And by considering a partner's resources and status, an individual should be more likely to obtain a mate who can ascend social hierarchies and form coalitions with

other people who have—or can acquire—valued social status or other resources.

Why do people not “want it all” in terms of their ideals, seeking out mates who are incredibly attractive, rich, and warm? First, relatively few people fit such a stellar description. Second, most people could not attract such a person, even if one were available. Third, even if someone succeeded in attracting such a paragon, it might be difficult to keep him or her. In short, people must normally make trade-offs between these attributes when deciding whom to date or marry.

Our Ideals Standards Model proposes that partner and relationship ideals serve three functions: evaluation, explanation, and regulation. More specifically, the size of discrepancies between ideal standards and perceptions of the current partner or relationship should be used by individuals to (a) estimate and evaluate the quality of their partners and relationships (e.g., assess the appropriateness of potential or current partners or relationships), (b) explain or provide an understanding of relationship events (e.g., give causal accounts explaining relationship satisfaction, problems, or conflicts), and (c) regulate and make adjustments in their relationships (e.g., predict and possibly control current partners or relationships).

Many relationship theorists have proposed that people need to idealize and enhance their romantic partners and relationships. Indeed, there is good evidence that individuals often do perceive their partners and relationships in an excessively positive, Pollyanna-ish light, and that the tendency to idealize one's partner is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and lower rates of dissolution (see Murray & Holmes, 1996).

It is not difficult to understand why people are motivated to ideal-

ize their partners and relationships. To begin with, the costs of relationship conflict and dissolution should motivate most individuals to perceive their partners and relationships in the best possible light. From a rational standpoint, most people know that approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce, at least in Western countries. Despite this realization, the vast majority of people get married and have children at some point in their lives. Committing to a long-term relationship, therefore, requires a leap of faith and a level of confidence that may well be difficult to justify on purely rational grounds. As a result, psychological pressures to make charitable and benevolent judgments about one's partner and relationship must be strong to counteract these forces. This might explain the potency of the enhancement motive in most relationships.

Thomas Huxley (1884) once lamented that “the great tragedy of Science [is] the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact” (p. 244). In this case, the beautiful hypothesis is the presumed pervasiveness and dominance of the relationship-enhancement motive. The ugly fact is that the vast majority of romantic relationships eventually break up. This latter fact suggests that the relationship-enhancement motive is often either inoperative or displaced by other basic motives in certain contexts.

Our model proposes that partner and relationship idealization will sometimes conflict with the goal of being accurate, especially when the effective prediction, explanation, and control of partners and relationships become important. Attempting to accurately understand and attribute motives and beliefs to others should be highly adaptive in certain situations (such as when deciding whether or not to start or remain in a relationship, or when deciding how best to predict or control the behavior of others).

Indeed, evolutionary pressures should have selected humans to ascertain and face the truth—no matter how bleak and depressing—in situations in which it was dangerous or extremely costly to do otherwise.

How can the coexistence of these two contrasting motives be reconciled? We believe that both enhancement and accuracy motives operate, but under different conditions. Relationship interactions that are highly threatening ought to increase the power of esteem-maintenance goals, subverting accurate attributions about the partner or the relationship. However, when the need to make accurate, unbiased judgments becomes critical in relationships (such as when individuals must decide whether or not to date someone, get married, or have a child), the accuracy motive should take precedence. When couples settle into a comfortable relationship phase of maintenance, the enhancement motive should once again become ascendant.

These contrasting motives have important implications for understanding the consequences of discrepancies between ideals and perceptions of the current partner or relationship. For example, when enhancement motives predominate, people should try to reduce ideal-perception discrepancies (and, thus, improve the evaluations that stem from them) by using cognitive strategies that involve rationalizing inconsistencies, altering attributions, or changing what they value in their partner or relationship. We suspect that such processes often occur automatically and largely outside of conscious awareness. However, in situations that demand greater accuracy (e.g., when important relationship decisions must be made, when attractive alternative partners become available, or when difficult relationship problems arise), moderate

to large ideal-perception discrepancies should motivate individuals to engage in more in-depth analysis and information processing. To reduce discrepancies, accuracy-motivated individuals are likely to use behavioral strategies, perhaps attempting to change their own or their partners' behavior. If individuals eventually come to the conclusion that the discrepancies are important but simply cannot be reduced, they may leave the relationship, look for new partners, or seek solace in other activities.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE MODEL

We currently are testing some of our model's basic postulates. We initially set out to identify the structure and content of partner and relationship ideals (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Adopting an inductive approach to identifying the ideals dimensions that people spontaneously use, in a first study we asked men and women to list all the traits or characteristics that described their ideal romantic partners and their ideal romantic relationships.

In a second study, another sample of men and women then rated the 78 items gathered in the first study in terms of perceived importance for their own standards concerning ideal partners and ideal relationships (using 7-point scales where 1 = *very unimportant* and 7 = *very important*). In order to determine the underlying structure of the perceived-importance ratings of the ideals, we carried out two exploratory factor analyses. A factor analysis of the ideal-partner items revealed the three factors we expected: (a) partner characteristics relevant to intimacy, warmth, trust, and loyalty; (b) personality and appearance characteristics concerning how at-

tractive, energetic, and healthy the partner is; and (c) characteristics relevant to the partner's social status and resources. The ideal-relationship items produced two factors that resembled two of the partner-based ideals: (a) the importance of intimacy, loyalty, and stability in a relationship and (b) the importance of excitement and passion in a relationship. The results of the factor analyses (the correlation, or loading, of each item on each factor) were used to assess which items belonged to which factors. We then summed the scores for items belonging to each factor, separately for each participant, to produce five separate scores representing the perceived importance of each general ideal category. Additional analyses and studies have confirmed the reliability and validity of these derived measures of the five factors.

The final study we reported (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) tested a basic postulate of our model—that individuals evaluate their current partners and relationships by comparing them against their ideal standards. To test this hypothesis, we asked a new sample of men and women to rank the importance of various ideal attributes and also to report their perceptions of their current partner or relationship on items taken from the ideal-partner and ideal-relationship scales. In addition, we asked subjects to rate how satisfied they were with their relationships. As predicted, individuals who reported smaller discrepancies between their ideal standards and their perceptions of the current partner and relationship rated their relationships more favorably.

Although these studies provided initial support for our model, they were cross-sectional in design and, therefore, could not test for possible causal relationships. To address this issue, we conducted a

longitudinal study (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 1999). A large sample of individuals in newly formed dating relationships completed a battery of measures assessing perceptions of their current partner or relationship, the quality of their relationship, and their ideal standards once a month for 3 months, and then at 12 months after the beginning of the relationship. The first measurement typically occurred 3 weeks after individuals had started dating someone.

As predicted, greater consistency between ideals and perceptions of the current partner or relationship (assessed at earlier times in the relationship) predicted increases in relationship satisfaction over time. Indeed, how closely partners matched individuals' ideals during the first month of dating strongly predicted how individuals felt about their relationships a full 12 months after the dating started. However, also as expected, higher initial levels of relationship satisfaction did not predict changes in levels of consistency between ideals and perceptions. These results suggest that cognitive comparisons between ideal standards and perceptions of the current partner or relationship are firmly in the cognitive driving seat in the initial stages of dating relationships.

We are currently investigating how self-perceptions, along with the flexibility of ideal standards, are related to how individuals set their ideal standards (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, in press). The higher that individuals set their ideal standards, the more demanding they are in terms of how closely they expect their partners to match their ideal standards. Although this may seem paradoxical, it is understandable in terms of other results showing that individuals with more positive self-views (e.g., on the vitality-attractiveness dimension) also possess

both higher ideal standards and less flexible ideal standards. For example, if a man perceives himself as very fit and highly attractive, he can set high expectations for obtaining a partner who is also highly fit and attractive. Moreover, if the chosen partner subsequently turns into a “couch potato” and gains weight, and this change is monitored by the man, then he is in a strong position to look for—and possibly find—an alternative partner who meets his exacting standards.

Many intriguing and important questions remain to be investigated. First, our theorizing concerning the different functions of relationship-enhancement and accuracy motives remains speculative. Second, we still know relatively little about how individuals establish and adjust their ideal standards over time. Third, and perhaps most important, there is a need to understand and research how ideals function and change within their natural home—the dyadic relationship. We know very little, for instance, about how ideal standards are communicated to the partner, or what happens when one partner is motivated to be accurate when the other partner is motivated to enhance the relationship. We also know almost nothing about whether possessing ideal standards that are similar to those held by one’s partner facilitates a relationship’s functioning and

quality, or how partners might influence one another concerning the perceived importance of particular ideals.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to think of another domain in social life in which the needs for prediction, control, and explanation are more pressing than in intimate relationships. The research and theory we have reported here are part of a burgeoning area within social psychology that is examining social cognition in close relationships. For years, it has been assumed that judgments and perceptions of relationships depend mainly on the nature of the individuals and interactions involved. Our research shows that there exist hidden “third parties”—mental images of ideal partners and ideal relationships—that also play a critical role in influencing judgments about relationships.

Recommended Reading

- Fletcher, G.J.O., Simpson, J.A., Thomas, G., & Giles, L. (1999). (See References)
- Fletcher, G.J.O., & Thomas, G. (1996). Lay theories in close relationships: Their structure and function. In G.J.O. Fletcher & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Knowledge structures in close relationships: A social psychological approach* (pp. 3–24). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Murray, S.L., & Holmes, J.G. (1996). (See References)
- Simpson, J.A., Fletcher, G.J.O., & Campbell, L.J. (in press). (See References)

Note

1. Address correspondence to either Garth Fletcher, Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, e-mail: g.fletcher@psyc.canterbury.ac.nz, or to Jeffrey A. Simpson, Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4235, e-mail: jas@psyc.tamu.edu.

References

- Campbell, L.J., Simpson, J.A., Kashy, D.A., & Fletcher, G.J.O. (in press). Ideal standards, the self, and flexibility of ideals in close relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.
- Fletcher, G.J.O., Simpson, J.A., & Thomas, G. (1999). *The role of ideals in early relationship development*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Fletcher, G.J.O., Simpson, J.A., Thomas, G., & Giles, L. (1999). Ideals in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 72–89.
- Gangestad, S.W., & Simpson, J.A. (in press). The evolution of human mating: Trade-offs and strategic pluralism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.
- Huxley, T.H. (1884). *Biogenesis and abiogenesis; collected essays*, Vol. 8. London: Macmillan.
- Murray, S.L., & Holmes, J.G. (1996). The construction of relationship realities. In G.J.O. Fletcher & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Knowledge structures in close relationships: A social psychological approach* (pp. 91–120). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Simpson, J.A., Fletcher, G.J.O., & Campbell, L.J. (in press). The structure and functions of ideal standards in close relationships. In G.J.O. Fletcher & M.S. Clark (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes*. London: Blackwell.