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# Tempting Fate or Inviting Happiness? Unrealistic Idealization Prevents the Decline of Marital Satisfaction

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## Abstract

This article examines whether unrealistically viewing a romantic partner as resembling one's ideal partner accelerates or slows declines in marital satisfaction among newlyweds. A longitudinal study linked unrealistic idealization at the time of marriage to changes in satisfaction over the first 3 years of marriage. Overall, satisfaction declined markedly, a finding that is consistent with past research. However, seeing a less-than-ideal partner as a reflection of one's ideals predicted a certain level of protection against the corrosive effects of time: People who initially idealized their partner the most experienced no decline in satisfaction. The benefits of idealization remained in analyses that controlled separately for the positivity of partner perceptions and the possibility that better adjusted people might be in better relationships.

## Keywords

idealization, positive illusions, marital satisfaction, longitudinal

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The excesses of hope must be expiated by pain; and expectations improperly indulged, must end in disappointment.

—Samuel Johnson (quoted in Boswell, 1832, p. 160)

What we need most is not so much to realize the ideal as to idealize the real.

—Francis Herbert Hedge (quoted in Deger & Gibson, 2006, p. 275)

Conventional wisdom sides with Johnson in cautioning romantic partners that being too idealistic is the road to disillusionment—and even divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). However, empirical research suggests that there is a case to be made for encouraging people to maintain positive, even unrealistic, perceptions and hence idealize the real (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). In this spirit, this article focuses on the specific role that idealizing a partner plays in buffering against the forces that might lead to declines in marital satisfaction.

## When Is the Honeymoon Truly Over?

Sustaining a satisfying marital relationship is crucial for physical and psychological health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Yet time does not treat marriages well. Over the newlywed years, partners shift their activities from fun and leisure to chores and drudgery (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). They also behave less responsively and relax efforts to be considerate (Huston et al., 2001). Conflicts increase. Satisfaction declines, often precipitously (Huston et al., 1986; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Such declines increase the likelihood of divorce (Kurdek, 1999). Because marital instability puts physical and psychological health at risk, identifying factors that might slow declines in marital satisfaction is crucial (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

In a study of newlyweds, we examined whether unrealistically viewing one's partner as a mirror of one's ideals sustains satisfaction in the relationship over time or, alternatively, sets one's relationship on the path to dissatisfaction. Some existing

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research suggests that idealistic biases might hasten distress. For example, people who blame their partner for problems, yet naively expect their partner to behave perfectly in the future, experience steeper declines in satisfaction over the newlywed years than do people with more realistic expectations (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Newlyweds who make charitable attributions for serious problems also experience steeper declines in marital satisfaction than do newlyweds who make less charitable attributions (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). In this cautionary light, people who believe that their partner mirrors their ideals might only be disappointed when time later reveals how their partner falls short of these lofty standards.

Nonetheless, the literature also points to an upside to idealization. Even though objectively harsh realities can contrast with people's optimistic expectations, people find ways to assimilate ambiguous evidence with desired beliefs about themselves and others (see Gagne & Lydon, 2003; Kunda, 1990; Martz et al., 1998; Neff & Karney, 2003; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In fact, research on positive illusions in relationships points to the benefits of seeing one's partner generously. For instance, people in satisfying marital relationships see their own relationship as superior to other people's relationships (Rusbult et al., 2000). They also see virtues in their partners that are not obvious to anyone else (Murray et al., 1996b; Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000). People in stable dating relationships even redefine what qualities they want in an ideal partner to match the qualities they perceive in their own partner (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Murray et al., 1996b).

In this charitable light, seeing a partner as a mirror of one's ideal partner might function as a generous filter that affords the optimism needed to cope effectively with the challenges that come with time. For instance, as interdependence increases, partners behave selfishly and disappoint one another more often (Kelley, 1979). People who see their partner as a better match to their ideals might perceive such transgressive behaviors as more forgivable (Arriaga, Slaughterbeck, Capezza, & Hmurovic, 2007; Miller et al., 2006; Murray et al., 1996b). Such charitable perceptions might motivate them to take more constructive remedial action (Murray et al., 2009; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). As the rush of infatuation fades during the early years of marriage, people might also find more of their attention drawn to alternative partners (H. E. Fisher, 1998). Seeing their partner as a match to their ideals might help motivate people to derogate such temptations, and thereby further sustain their satisfaction (Lydon, Menzies-Toman, Burton, & Bell, 2008). In addition, as time passes, being unduly anxious about a partner's potential rejection takes a progressively greater toll on satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). However, people who see insecure partners generously might subtly communicate such idealized perceptions and thereby ameliorate their partners' rejection anxieties (Murray et al., 1996b).

In this article, we report the first longitudinal study to examine how the illusion of perceiving one's partner as ideal affects the fate of new marriages. Existing research points to some long-term benefits of seeing one's marital partner positively.

Specifically, perceiving a spouse more generously than his or her behavior warrants predicts marginal increases in love (Miller et al., 2006); seeing one's own relationship as superior to others also predicts increased commitment (Rusbult et al., 2000). However, no existing research has examined how unrealistically seeing a partner as a match to one's ideals affects the trajectory of satisfaction in new marriages.

In this study, newlyweds rated themselves, their partner, and their hopes for an ideal partner on 20 interpersonal qualities every 6 months over 3 years. They also reported marital satisfaction at each of these seven time points. Building on prior research on the benefits of positive illusions (Miller et al., 2006; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b), we expected unrealistic idealization to temper, not accelerate, declines in satisfaction.

### Separating Unrealistic and Realistic Idealization

Models of social perception suggest that perceptions of one's partner are shaped by one's hopes, yet constrained by reality (Kunda, 1990). Such models imply, for example, that Ron's perception of his partner, Gayle, may reflect both Gayle's actual qualities (realism) and the qualities Ron hopes to see in his ideal partner (idealization bias). Testing these models requires a proxy for reality because there is typically no objective way to determine what qualities Gayle actually possesses. We utilized Gayle's self-perceptions as a benchmark for reality because self-perceptions tend to be grounded in reality (John & Robins, 1994), yet inflated on average (John & Robins, 1994; Taylor & Brown, 1988). This bias in self-perceptions makes our "reality" benchmark conservative for most people because idealization of one's partner would qualify as an illusion or bias only if it transcends any tendency of the partner to see him- or herself positively.

We conceptualized idealization as a motivated process in which Ron comes to believe that the specific qualities he hopes for in an ideal partner (e.g., someone who is warm rather than demanding and clumsy rather than athletic) match the qualities Gayle actually possesses. Thus, idealization does not simply involve seeing one's partner positively; rather, it involves seeing a match between the particular characteristics that one's actual partner and one's ideal partner possess. We indexed idealization through a *perceived-ideal correlation*, an intraclass correlation between the actor's ratings of his or her partner and the actor's ratings of his or her ideal partner across 20 qualities. More positive perceived-ideal correlations capture a higher degree of match between the actor's perception of the partner and the actor's ideals. We indexed realism in a similar manner through a *real-ideal correlation*, an intraclass correlation between the partner's self-ratings across the same 20 qualities and the actor's ratings of the ideal partner. More positive real-ideal correlations capture a higher degree of match between the partner's self-perceptions and the actor's ideal partner, indicating that the actor is more justified in his or her perception of the partner as ideal. Calculating these

idiographic correlations involved treating the 20 qualities (e.g., warm, demanding) as rows and perception (i.e., actor's ideal partner, actor's perceived partner, partner's self-perceptions) as columns within the data set.

Testing our hypotheses required identifying unrealistic idealization, or bias, and relating bias to satisfaction. In our analyses, we statistically isolated bias by controlling for the actual match between the actor's ideals and the partner's self-perceptions (i.e., the real-ideal correlation) when we examined the effects of the actor's perceptions (i.e., the perceived-ideal correlation) on marital satisfaction.

## Hypotheses

We expected actors who idealized their partner more at the time of marriage to be more satisfied than actors who idealized their partner less. But what would happen over time? We expected that actors who perceived their partner as resembling their ideal would continue to benefit from this perception over time. That is, we expected people who initially idealized their partner more to experience smaller declines in satisfaction over the first years of marriage. We also expected actors to benefit from being idealized by their partner. That is, when the partner idealized the actor more at the time of marriage, we expected the actor to experience smaller declines in satisfaction over time.

Our approach invites two alternative explanations for the hypothesized effects. First, the real-ideal correlation between Gayle's self-perceptions and Ron's ideals might not capture any meaningful reality about Gayle. If that were the case, controlling for this correlation would not control for realism (i.e., it would leave the realism component of the perceived-ideal correlation largely intact). In such a scenario, any apparent benefits of idealization might actually reflect the benefits of having a more desirable and well-adjusted partner (i.e., someone who is higher in self-esteem, less neurotic, less depressed, or more secure in attachment style). Second, the perceived-ideal correlation between Ron's perceptions of Gayle and his ideal might capture nothing more than how positively Ron sees Gayle overall. If this is the case, any apparent benefits of idealization might simply reflect the benefits of seeing one's partner generously. We first tested our basic hypotheses about the longitudinal benefits of unrealistic idealization of one's partner. We then assessed and ruled out each of these alternative explanations.

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred twenty-two childless couples in first marriages of 2 to 6 months' duration participated in a seven-wave longitudinal study. The sample consisted of the 193 couples who provided three or more data points each. The sample was predominantly White (89%). At Time 1, participants were 27.2

years old on average ( $SD = 4.0$ ), and the median family income ranged from \$40,000 to \$70,000 per year. Participants received escalating payments for each wave.

### Procedure

Both members of each couple completed measures of personality and psychological well-being at Time 1. They described themselves, their partner, and their hopes for an ideal partner on the Interpersonal Qualities Scale (Murray et al., 1996a) at seven biannual assessments. They also completed a measure of marital satisfaction at each time point. Participants completed these measures in the laboratory at the initial, 12-month, 24-month, and 36-month assessments and by mail at the 6-, 18-, and 30-month assessments.

### Measures

**Interpersonal Qualities Scale.** This 20-item measure tapped perceptions of targets' positive (i.e., *kind and affectionate, self-assured, sociable/extraverted, intelligent, open and disclosing, witty and humorous, patient, rational, understanding, warm, responsive, tolerant and accepting*) and negative (i.e., *critical and judgmental, lazy, thoughtless, controlling and dominant, moody, distant, complaining, immature*) interpersonal qualities (Murray et al., 1996a). In counterbalanced order, participants rated themselves, their partner, and their ideal or most preferred partner on these attributes (on a scale from 0, *not at all*, to 8, *completely characteristic*).

**Satisfaction.** This four-item measure ( $\alpha = .84$ ; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b) tapped participants' global evaluations of their relationship's quality (e.g., "I am extremely satisfied with my relationship" and "I have a very strong relationship with my partner").

**Global self-esteem.** The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale tapped feelings of self-worth (e.g., "I feel like a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others").

**Depression.** The six-item Center for Epidemiological Studies depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) indexed the occurrence of depressive symptoms over the prior month (e.g., "I felt depressed").

**Neuroticism.** The 12-item subscale of the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; McCrae & Costa, 1989) indexed participants' neuroticism and negative affectivity (e.g., "I am not a worrier," reverse-scored).

**Attachment.** Collins and Read's (1990) 18-item attachment scale tapped participants' general feelings of anxiety (e.g., "I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me") and avoidance (e.g., "I know that people will be there when I need them") in interpersonal relationships.

**Table 1.** Results of Multilevel Analyses Predicting Actors' Marital Satisfaction Over Time

Predictor	Men		Women	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Intercept	6.893 (0.041)	—	6.893 (0.041)	—
Time	-0.097 (0.012)	-8.08***	-0.097 (0.012)	-8.08***
Actor's initial idealization	0.189 (0.077)	2.45*	0.189 (0.077)	2.45*
Partner's initial idealization	0.142 (0.071)	2.00*	0.142 (0.071)	2.00*
Actor's Initial Idealization × Time	0.122 (0.023)	5.30***	0.122 (0.023)	5.30***
Partner's Initial Idealization × Time	0.055 (0.021)	2.62**	0.055 (0.021)	2.62**
Control variables isolating the effect of bias				
Actor's initial realism	-0.123 (0.094)	-1.31	-0.123 (0.094)	-1.31
Partner's initial realism	-0.161 (0.107)	-1.50	0.078 (0.119)	0.66
Actor's Initial Realism × Time	-0.017 (0.029)	-0.59	-0.017 (0.029)	-0.59
Partner's Initial Realism × Time	0.024 (0.028)	0.86	0.024 (0.028)	0.86
Actor's realism at each measurement point	0.062 (0.066)	0.94	0.062 (0.066)	0.94
Partner's realism at each measurement point	0.669 (0.091)	7.35***	0.135 (0.090)	1.50
Control variables removing synchronous associations between idealization and satisfaction				
Actor's idealization at each measurement point	0.716 (0.062)	11.55***	1.074 (0.063)	17.05***
Partner's idealization at each measurement point	0.214 (0.047)	4.55***	0.214 (0.047)	4.55***
Actor's initial satisfaction	0.786 (0.039)	20.15***	0.786 (0.039)	20.15***
Actor's Initial Satisfaction × Time	-0.092 (0.012)	7.67***	-0.092 (0.012)	7.67***

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses. Pooled coefficients are repeated across columns.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Results

Our analyses proceeded in four steps. First, we computed intraclass idealization (i.e., perceived-ideal) and realism (i.e., real-ideal) correlations for each participant at each time point; these correlations were transformed using R. A. Fisher's (1921) procedure. Second, we confirmed that marital satisfaction, on average, declined over time, and did so more for some people than for others. Third, we showed that unrealistic idealization predicted the slope of this decline. Fourth, we ruled out the alternative explanations.

### Does marital satisfaction decline differentially over time?

To answer this question, we used MLwiN (Goldstein et al., 1998) to model our data as a three-level nested structure with time at the lowest level, person at the second level, and gender within couple at the highest level. This approach simultaneously estimated one regression equation for women and one for men, controlling for the interdependence between dyad members. It also allowed tests of gender differences and pooling of coefficients in the absence of such differences.<sup>1,2</sup>

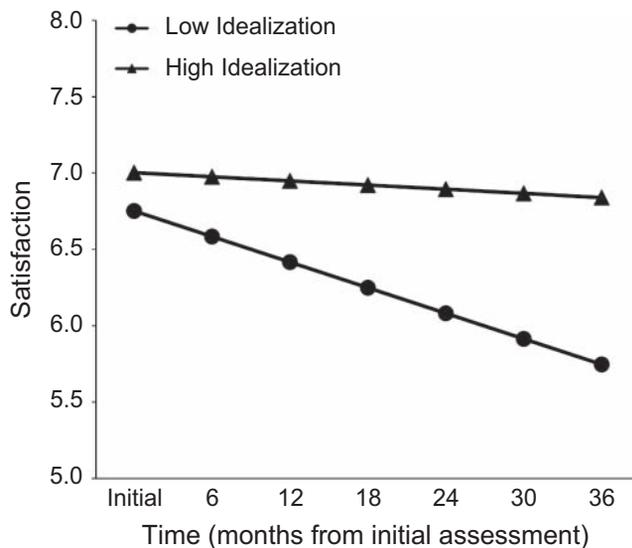
We predicted satisfaction at each time point from an intercept term; the linear effect of time (the time points were scored from 0 to 6), a within-person fixed effect that captured the average trajectory of change in actors' satisfaction; and error terms. The effect of time (pooled across gender) was significant and negative. Satisfaction declined on average,  $b =$

$-0.131$ ,  $SE = 0.011$ ,  $z = 11.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . We then allowed the linear effect of time to vary across people: Specifying time as a random effect significantly improved model fit, a result indicating that some people experienced steeper declines in satisfaction than others.

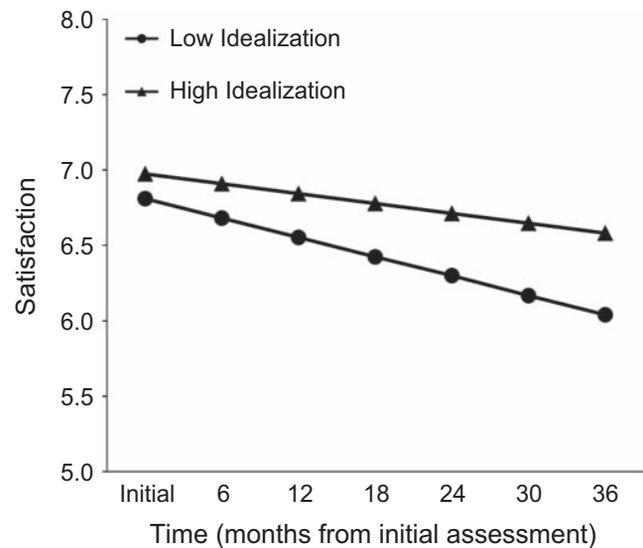
### Does unrealistic idealization slow declines in marital satisfaction?

Next, we added main effect and interaction terms to the model to try to identify the individuals for whom satisfaction declined least over time. Table 1 lists the variables in this model and the coefficients for the equations for men and women. To address the idealization hypotheses, we added actors' Time 1 idealization index (i.e., perceived-ideal correlation), a between-person variable that captures whether actors were initially more satisfied when they idealized their partner more; partners' Time 1 idealization index, a between-person variable that allowed us to determine whether actors were initially more satisfied when their partners idealized them more; and the interactions between time and actors' Time 1 idealization indices and between time and partners' Time 1 idealization indices. These variables allowed us to test whether actors' initial idealization of partners or partners' initial idealization of actors predicted actors' satisfaction trajectories, as hypothesized.

We also included two sets of control variables, which were entered simultaneously with the central variables. To isolate unrealistic idealization, we added actors' and partners' Time 1



**Fig. 1.** Trajectory of actors' marital satisfaction over time as a function of their initial unrealistic idealization of their partner. Initial idealization 1 standard deviation above the mean corresponds to high idealization, whereas initial idealization 1 standard deviation below the mean corresponds to low idealization.



**Fig. 2.** Trajectory of actors' marital satisfaction over time as a function of partners' initial unrealistic idealization of the actors. Initial idealization 1 standard deviation above the mean corresponds to high idealization, whereas initial idealization 1 standard deviation below the mean corresponds to low idealization.

realism indices (i.e., real-ideal correlations) and the interactions of these indices with time, between-person variables that allowed us to determine whether declines in satisfaction depended on the match between reality and ideals, and actors' and partners' realism indices at each time of measurement, within-person variables that allowed us to determine whether people were happier at those times when reality better matched their ideals. To remove the synchronous association between idealization and satisfaction from the trajectory, we added actors' and partners' idealization indices at each time of measurement, within-person variables that allowed us to test whether actors were happier (relative to their own mean) at those points in time when they idealized their partner more and their partner idealized them more, and actors' initial satisfaction and its interaction with time, a between-person variable that allowed us to determine whether declines in satisfaction depended on its initial level.<sup>3</sup>

As expected, the interaction between actors' initial level of unrealistic idealization and time was significant (see Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates this interaction by showing the satisfaction trajectories for actors 1 standard deviation above and below the mean on initial unrealistic idealization (controlling for all other variables in the model; Aiken & West, 1991). Satisfaction declined sharply for actors who initially idealized their partner less than average,  $b = -0.169$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ ,  $z = -9.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, actors who initially idealized their partner more than average did not experience any significant decline,  $b = -0.026$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ ,  $z = -1.44$ .

The interaction between partners' initial level of unrealistic idealization and time was also significant. Actors' satisfaction declined more when their partners initially idealized them less

(see Fig. 2). The synchronous effects of unrealistic idealization on satisfaction at each time point (i.e., the within-person effects) were also significant. Actors reported greater satisfaction at the times when they idealized their partner more and their partner idealized them more (relative to their own means). The interaction between time and initial satisfaction revealed that satisfaction declined more when people started off happier, and therefore had farther to fall.

**Does greater satisfaction stem from having better partners?** If the real-ideal correlation fails to capture something meaningful about the partner's reality, then the apparent benefits of actors' unrealistic idealization in fostering continued marital satisfaction could simply reflect the benefits of having a more desirable partner. To assess this possibility, we correlated the partners' self-esteem, neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and avoidance with the real-ideal correlation for the actors (see Table 2). Partners who were a better match to actors' ideals were higher in self-esteem, lower in neuroticism and depression, and less anxious and avoidant in attachment style. This suggests that the real-ideal correlation does capture something meaningful about the partners' reality. Moreover, the benefits of unrealistic idealization could not be explained by partners' personal adjustment. We added measures of actors' and partners' initial adjustment (e.g., self-esteem) and their interactions with time to the predictors listed in Table 1. In each analysis, the interactions between actors' unrealistic idealization and time and between partners' unrealistic idealization and time remained significant (see Table 3). Actors reported less steep declines in satisfaction the more they initially idealized their partner and the more their partner initially idealized

**Table 2.** Correlations Between Partner's Personal Adjustment and Actor's Real-Ideal Correlation

Gender of partner	Partner's personal adjustment				
	Self-esteem	Depression	Neuroticism	Anxiety	Avoidance
Female	.38	-.40	-.38	-.18	-.25
Male	.49	-.33	-.40	-.19	-.37

Note: All correlations are significant,  $p < .01$ .

them regardless of actors' and partners' level of self-esteem, neuroticism, depression, or attachment security. Therefore, the apparent benefits of unrealistic idealization cannot be explained by the alternative that better-adjusted people are in better-functioning relationships.

### **Does simple positivity account for differences in satisfaction?**

It is still possible that the apparent benefits of actors' unrealistic idealization actually captured the benefits of seeing one's partner more generously in general. To distinguish idealization—defined as the fit between the ideal and the perceived partner—from general positivity, we averaged each participant's ratings of the partner's traits across the 20 interpersonal qualities to create general positivity indices (the negative traits were reverse-scored). We then added the actors' and the partners' general positivity indices and their interactions with time to a multilevel model that included the predictors listed in Table 1. The interaction between actors' unrealistic idealization and time remained significant,  $b = 0.106$ ,  $SE = 0.033$ ,  $z = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ . Actors reported less steep declines in satisfaction when they idealized their partner more at the time of marriage, even when we controlled for how generously they perceived their partner overall. Moreover, actors' general positivity did not interact with time in predicting actors' satisfaction trajectory,  $b = 0.017$ ,  $SE = 0.022$ ,  $z = 0.77$ . Thus, it was the specific capacity to see their partner as a match to their ideals that sustained participants' marital satisfaction over time.<sup>4</sup>

## **Discussion**

Newlyweds who saw an imperfect partner as a match to their ideals exhibited considerable resilience in their marriages. At any given point in time, unrealistic idealization of the partner predicted greater marital satisfaction. That is, people reported greater satisfaction at those time points when they idealized their partner more (relative to their own means). Across time, unrealistic idealization of the partner predicted sustained satisfaction. Remarkably, participants who initially exhibited high unrealistic idealization of their partner experienced no decline in marital satisfaction. In contrast, those who initially idealized their partner the least experienced precipitous declines in satisfaction. Moreover, partners' unrealistic idealization of actors predicted the same benefits for actors' satisfaction.

There is one notable limitation to these data—a limitation that is inherent to studying how real-life relationships change over time: The data are correlational. Examining change over time provides the best means of studying causation naturalistically, but it does not offer definitive proof. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that a third variable might account for the effects we observed. However, we did assess (and rule out) the two most obvious third variables. The first possibility was that the real-ideal correlation might not capture anything meaningful about the partner's reality. If this was the case, idealization might predict sustained satisfaction because actors

**Table 3.** Results of Multilevel Analyses Predicting Actors' Marital Satisfaction Over Time From Actors' and Partners' Idealization While Controlling for Actors' and Partners' Personal Adjustment

Personal-adjustment control variable	Actor's idealization		Partner's idealization	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Self-esteem	0.121 (0.023)	5.26***	0.054 (0.021)	2.57*
Depression	0.111 (0.023)	4.83***	0.042 (0.021)	2.00*
Neuroticism	0.120 (0.023)	5.22***	0.053 (0.022)	2.41*
Anxiety	0.119 (0.023)	5.17***	0.049 (0.021)	2.33*
Avoidance	0.120 (0.023)	5.22***	0.052 (0.021)	2.48*

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses. The reported coefficients are pooled across gender.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

who idealize their partners actually have better partners. However, partners who were a better match to actors' ideals were higher in self-esteem, lower in neuroticism, lower in depression, and less anxious and avoidant in attachment style, and all of these qualities are desirable in a spouse (Murray et al., 2006). This suggests that the real-ideal correlation provides a reasonable proxy for reality. Furthermore, unrealistic idealization retained its protective power in analyses that explicitly modeled the effects of possessing a more desirable partner on the trajectory of marital satisfaction. The second possibility was that the apparent benefits of seeing a partner as a match to one's ideals simply capture the benefits of seeing one's partner more positively. This was not the case either. Actors reported less steep declines in marital satisfaction when they initially idealized their partner more even when we controlled for the tendency to see the partner generously.

The findings are noteworthy in several respects. The protective effects of unrealistic idealization emerged despite the fact that individuals who were initially the happiest generally had further to fall. That is, people who were more satisfied initially experienced steeper declines in satisfaction. Also, further analyses revealed that people who initially idealized their partner more also experienced steeper declines in the perception that their partner met their ideals. Despite these evident risks of disappointment, initial idealization predicted sustained satisfaction over the course of marriage. Also, the protective effect of idealization emerged in analyses using an indirect measure—the tendency to ascribe the same specific traits to one's own partner and one's ideal partner. Finally, the apparent benefits of unrealistic idealization emerged in analyses that controlled for the degree to which the actors actually did find the qualities they hoped to find in their partners (at least according to the partners' self-ratings). The findings thus speak to the prevalence and power of positive perceptual biases in relationships (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010).

Idealizing a partner might have protective effects because people have the power to shape their romantic fates through their behavior. Indeed, the behaviors that sustain relationships (e.g., being supportive) and the behaviors that undermine relationships (e.g., being critical) are controllable ones. Therefore, believing that a partner reflects one's hopes might predict continued satisfaction because it fosters the optimism that is needed to behave well and cope admirably with the costs and challenges that come with interdependence (Murray & Holmes, 2011). The power that idealization might have in fostering such resilience likely rests in the flexibility of the construal process itself (Griffin & Ross, 1991). Over time, people in dating relationships redefine their ideals to match the qualities they perceive in their partners (Fletcher et al., 2000; Murray et al., 1996b). The same processes may be reflected in the results reported here. As time and greater interdependence reveal exactly how a partner is disappointing, people who flexibly adjust their ideals to match the qualities they now perceive in their partner might stay satisfied despite the disappointments (Kunda, 1990).

## Conclusion

Rather than setting couples up for disappointment, unrealistic idealization predicted resilience against the corrosive effects of time. Idealizing one's partner and being idealized by one's partner predicted sustained relationship satisfaction. Rather than tempting fate, seeing one's partner as a close reflection of one's ideals seems to invite happiness.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. We present separate coefficients for men and women in cases in which the deviance tests for separate coefficients were significant,  $\chi^2(1) > 3.84, p < .05$ .
2. We centered continuous within-person variables around the participant's own mean and continuous between-person variables around the sample mean, separately for men and women (Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, & Brennan, 1993).
3. Results parallel to those presented in Table 1 were obtained for a model that did not include initial satisfaction and its interaction with time as control variables in predicting satisfaction trajectories.
4. The interaction between partner's unrealistic idealization and time was not a significant predictor of satisfaction in the analysis that controlled for positivity, perhaps because actors might not be able to discriminate between being seen positively and being seen as a match to the partner's ideals.

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