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"You Are So Beautiful... To Me": Romantic Partners' Insight Into Others' Perceptions

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of Psychology

"You Are So Beautiful… To Me":

Romantic Partners' Insight Into Others' Perceptions

by

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Abstract

Do romantic partners see each other realistically or do they have overly positive perceptions of each other? Research has shown that realism and positivity co-exist in romantic partners' perceptions (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007). The current study examines a novel approach to understanding how this seemingly paradoxical effect occurs. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that people are aware that others do not see their partners as positively as they do. Using both mean differences and correlational approaches, we test the notion that, despite their own biased perceptions, people have insight into how their partners see themselves (i.e., identity accuracy) and how others see their partners (i.e., reputation accuracy). We focus the first test of this phenomenon on perceptions of attractiveness, a highly evaluative trait important for mate selection and partner perception. Our results suggest that romantic partners have a sophisticated level of knowledge about each other, and this multi-faceted knowledge helps fulfill motives driven by both esteem- and epistemic-related needs (i.e., the need to see partners positively and realistically).

Keywords: romantic partners, interpersonal perception, bias, realism

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Introduction

What do people know about their romantic partners? Attaining a satisfying romantic relationship is an important goal for most adults (Berscheid, 1999). People have a strong desire to know and be known by their partners (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994), and established romantic relationships should lead to strong knowledge of each other's personalities. Previous research has shown that there is a substantial amount of self-other agreement about personality among relationship partners (the correlation between targets' self-perceptions and partners' perceptions of the targets). However, partners may know more about each other than is captured by self-other agreement. For instance, do people know how their partners see themselves? Do people know their partners' reputations? In other words, do people have insight into the notion that others may see their partners differently than they do? Given that romantic partners directly influence one another's wellbeing and even physical health (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000; Roberts, Smith, Jackson, & Edmonds, 2009), it is important to study the extent to which couple members really know each other's personalities, beyond self-other agreement.

Understanding personality perceptions in the context of established romantic relationships may also shed light on what makes romantic relationships unique from other types of close relationships. For instance, are couple members more accurate in judging each other's personalities than are friends? Few studies have compared whether romantic

partners are more positively biased than different types of close others, such as friends and family members (c.f., Martz, Verette, Arriaga, Slovik, Cox, & Rusbult, 1998; Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). If most close others' perceptions are generally more positive than self-perceptions, then robust findings in the literature suggesting overwhelming positivity in romantic partners' perceptions may not tell the whole story. For instance, if partners and friends both have positive perceptions and agree about a target's personality, perhaps romantic partners do not see one another through rosier glasses than do other close others. Thus, to understand the unique knowledge and biases romantic partners have about each other, we will compare the accuracy of romantic partners' perceptions to friends' perceptions.

Despite their biases, couple members may be in a unique position to have a sophisticated level of knowledge about their romantic partners. For example, romantic partners may have unique insight into each other's self-views and into how their partner is seen by others (i.e., they may know their partner's identity and reputation). Thus, to fully understand what romantic partners know about one another, we must look beyond their own perceptions of their partners and examine what they know about how their partners see themselves and how they are seen by others.

Before we explore partners' knowledge of each other's identity and reputation, we review the existing literature on social perceptions in romantic relationships more generally. Based on this literature review, we argue that both positivity and self-other agreement are associated with greater relationship satisfaction, and that both can coexist in partner-perceptions. Then, we suggest that partners' knowledge of each other's identity and reputation is another way that partners can maintain both positive and realistic views

of each other. Our study is designed to test this idea.

The well-known positivity bias among couples is consistent with the idea that people choose partners based on needs for self-enhancement. This may hold true because couples' personalities reflect upon one another and because of the high inclusion of the other (i.e., romantic partner) in the self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Thus, being seen in an especially positive light by a romantic partner should be conducive to satisfying relationships (e.g., positive illusions model; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Indeed, romantic partners in satisfying relationships tend to idealize each other and project their enhanced self-views onto their partners (Murray et al., 2000). Moreover, people have positive illusions about their romantic relationships that are beneficial for relationship functioning (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Boyes, 2006; Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Gagne & Lydon, 2004; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000).

On the other hand, the need to feel accepted and understood in one's relationship (Swann et al., 1994) is consistent with the notion that people choose their partners based on needs for validation. Self-verification theory applied to romantic relationships explains the desire for people to want their partners to see them as they see themselves (i.e., agreement), thereby fulfilling these needs. Moreover, Hardin and Conley's shared reality theory highlights the benefits of self-partner agreement within romantic couples (2000). Given that self-partner agreement is necessary for intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Reis & Shaver, 1988), it is not surprising that there is substantial evidence in the literature that self-other agreement exists in romantic partners' perceptions (e.g., Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Murray et al., 1996; Neff & Karney, 2005; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

While bias and agreement may seem mutually exclusive, there is evidence that romantic partners can simultaneously hold both types of perceptions. One reason for this is that bias and agreement are typically measured using different data analytical approaches, and thus the two phenomena can be statistically independent (for a review, see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). In fact, there is now consensus that satisfied romantic partners can simultaneously hold both overly positive and realistic views.

One of the ways partners can be both realistic and overly positive is by being realistic for some traits and overly positive for other traits (Neff & Karney, 2005). For example, Mike might be realistic about how messy his girlfriend Sarah is while also seeing her as more interesting than she really is. In this way, Mike is both realistic (about a specific trait) and positively biased (about a global trait). Another way bias and realism can co-exist in couples' perceptions is if the couples show bias in their perceptions of the relationship but have realistic perceptions of their partners' personalities (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). These and other findings (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Boyes, 2006; Gagne & Lydon, 2004; Luo & Snyder, 2010) suggest that people in romantic relationships are capable of maintaining both realistic and biased views of their partners, and that this balance is important for relationship functioning. Here we present another process by which couple members may be able to fulfill both the need to see each other positively and the need to maintain realistic views of each other: by having overly positive perceptions of their partner's personality while acknowledging that others do not share their perspective.

Our novel approach to understanding how realism and bias can coexist is to examine what romantic partners know about one another, beyond their own perceptions

of their partners. For instance, Mike might see his partner Sarah as high in agreeableness, but he might recognize that she sees herself as disagreeable, and that Sarah's friends also perceive her as less agreeable than he does. If this were the case, it could be argued that such insight into the idiosyncratic nature of his own perceptions indicates a degree of realism – he knows that his overly positive views of Sarah are not universally shared.

Previous research has shown that people have impressive meta-cognitive skills when it comes to understanding how others' perceptions differ from their own. For instance, people have insight into others' perceptions of their own personality (i.e., meta-accuracy; Carlson & Kenny, 2012), know how specific others see them (Carlson & Furr, 2009), and know that even close others do not see them exactly as they see themselves (i.e., meta-insight; Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2011). While meta-insight and meta-accuracy are related to *self*-knowledge, perhaps such meta-cognitive abilities exist for *other*-knowledge. Thus, the phenomenon we explore in the current study is also a type of meta-cognitive skill: Are people aware of the differences between how they see their partners and how others see their partners?

Why might romantic partners have unique insight into each other's personalities? Vazire's (2010) Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model outlines the aspects of personality that close others should be able to see especially clearly. Vazire points out that romantic partners may be in a uniquely good position to have knowledge about one another's personalities. Specifically, Vazire argues, based on previous literature (e.g., John & Robins, 1993), that perceivers form more accurate impressions of a target when they have greater access to both the target's overt behaviors across a range of contexts, and to the target's internal thoughts and feelings. Indeed romantic partners, relative to

other types of close others, are uniquely positioned to have observed each other across a range of contexts, and to share information with each other about their thoughts and feelings. In addition to couple members' motivation to know their partners well (to predict behavior and for harmony in the relationship), they may be able to achieve realistic views about their partners' personalities by utilizing their unique access to covert information and also taking on an outsider's perspective. Therefore, romantic partners may have a sophisticated level of knowledge about each other's personalities by having insight through several perceptual lenses (those of their partners, outsiders of the relationship, and their own).

Vazire's (2010) prediction is consistent with research showing that accuracy in personality perceptions improves with increases in relationship status from friendship to dating to marriage (Watson et al., 2000) and generally with better (as opposed to less) acquainted dyads (Watson & Clark, 1991). Thus, romantic partners may hold a sophisticated level of knowledge about one another. For instance, increases in degree of acquaintance (i.e., information quantity and quality) are associated with greater self-other agreement, consensus, and realistic accuracy (Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006). Importantly, these increases in realistic personality perceptions are due to increases in intimacy, not simply to increasing length of acquaintanceship. Romantic partners in established relationships tend to have high levels of intimacy and thus are positioned to know each other well. Given that romantic relationships are usually more intimate than other close relationships, these findings support the notion that romantic partners may have more insight into their partner's personality than do close friends and family members (Vazire & Solomon, in press).

As mentioned above, romantic partners are also highly motivated to see one another in an especially positive light. Although it may seem difficult for partners to maintain these biased perceptions in the face of all the unique information they possess about their partner's personality, we propose that romantic partners can achieve this balance of realism and bias by understanding that their own biased views of their partners are idiosyncratic and not shared by others. That is, they can have their own positive illusions about their partner while maintaining a realistic view of how their partner is seen by others.

Based on the person perception and relationships literature, perhaps people are generally motivated to capitalize on their capacity to understand another person's point of view when it comes to better understanding their romantic partners. That is, people may achieve a more realistic and complete understanding of their partners through awareness of others' perceptions, beyond their own. Next, we discuss two specific examples of how romantic partners can use their meta-cognitive skills to achieve insight into others' perceptions, thereby increasing their respective levels of partner-knowledge.

Knowledge of Identity.

One of the ways we conceptualize other-knowledge is the judge's knowledge of the target's self-perception. Although this conceptualization of other-knowledge is rare nowadays (c.f., Simms, 2010), it has a long history. Historically, researchers used perceivers' predictions of targets' self-ratings as an accuracy criterion for other-knowledge (Bender & Hastorf, 1950; Dymond, 1949; Gage & Cronbach, 1955; Taft, 1966). Similarly, the concept of empathy has been used to examine whether people understand each other. Within a dyad, empathic accuracy (the degree to which someone

is able to infer a target person's thoughts and feelings) is positively correlated with motivational factors such as a target's physical attractiveness and a partner's interest in the target (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990). Empathy has also been conceptualized as a kind of social-cognitive bonding (Titchener, 1915). Thus, it is not surprising that empathic accuracy typically has positive effects on the quality of close relationships (Ickes & Simpson, 1997). Given that couple members tend to be especially motivated to understand each other and to maintain an enriched connection, romantic partners may have unique insight into each other's identities (i.e., how they see themselves). In the present study, we examine whether romantic partners and friends are able to achieve this type of knowledge.

Knowledge of Reputation.

Another way we conceptualize other-knowledge is the judge's knowledge of how the target is seen by others (or the target's reputation). This type of other-knowledge has received virtually no attention in the person perception literature. A related phenomenon is third-party meta-perception (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & De-Paulo, 1993; Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966), which refers to how one person thinks another person perceives a third person. Regardless of people's own impressions of a target, they have the ability to take another person's perspective about the target. For instance, people can accurately guess how much another person likes a target (Kenny, Bond, Mohr, & Horn, 1996). In the context of romantic relationships, it may be the case that couples can see their partners very positively, yet also successfully engage in third-person perspective taking; in other words, have insight into how other people see their partners.

Previous research has shown that romantic partners have positive illusions, but little is known about the degree to which partners are in touch (or out of touch) with reality – do they know that others do not share their positive illusions? Romantic partners' insight into the notion that neither their partners nor outsiders of the relationship share their own views about their partners would suggest that realism exists in romantic relationships. We now turn to our hypotheses.

DEFINITIONS AND HYPOTHESES.

In our novel approach to studying romantic partner knowledge of personality, we examined the extent to which people know how others see their partners by testing for knowledge of identity and knowledge of reputation. We used romantic partner *perceived identity* and *perceived reputation* ratings of targets to help determine whether romantic partners can achieve *identity accuracy* and *reputation accuracy.*

Perceived identity and *perceived reputation* refer to a romantic partner's beliefs about how the target sees herself and how others see the target, respectively. *Identity accuracy* and *reputation accuracy* refer to the extent to which romantic partners have insight into (i.e., are accurate about) how the target actually sees herself (i.e., her identity) and how friends actually see target (i.e., her reputation), respectively.

Another novel aspect of the present study is that we compare the effects found among romantic partners to parallel effects among friends. It is important to obtain this benchmark in order to understand whether the effects found among romantic partners are unique to romantic relationships. We later describe the statistical approaches we used in our analyses for determining whether such phenomena exist.

We predicted that romantic partners simultaneously have biased, realistic, and

unique perceptions of their partners with the following hypotheses: H1a) romantic partners are positively biased in their own perceptions of targets and H1b) romantic partners have idiosyncratic perceptions (i.e., do not agree with targets or friends); H2) romantic partners know how targets see themselves (i.e., have identity accuracy); H3) identity accuracy is unique to romantic partners; H4) romantic partners know how others see targets (i.e., have reputation accuracy). In other words, despite the positivity and idiosyncracy of romantic partners' own perceptions relative to self- and friend-perceptions, romantic partners achieve *identity accuracy* and *reputation accuracy*; that is, awareness of how their partners see themselves and how they are seen by others, respectively. We also predicted that the ability to achieve *identity accuracy* is stronger for romantic partners than for friends.

To provide a first test of our hypotheses, we focused on knowledge of *attractiveness*, an especially evaluative trait that is also highly relevant for mate selection (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Rowatt, DeLue, Strickhouser, & Gonzalez, 2001) and assessment in romantic relationships (Eastwick, Eagly, Finkel, & Johnson, 2011). Put another way, attractiveness is an example of an attribute that is very important in new relationships and is a characteristic about which people are likely to have illusions. As discussed above, romantic partners are motivated and likely to have positive illusions about their partners, especially for this type of trait. Indeed, research has shown that positive biases are more prominent for traits more central to romantic partner evaluation and relationship-related traits, even when controlling for specificity vs. globality (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007). Moreover, accuracy varies with respect to trait relevance. For example, personally relevant traits (which are central to identity) are associated with higher levels of self-

other agreement, whereas socially relevant traits (which are socially desirable) are associated with lower levels of self-other agreement (Koestner, Bernieri, & Zuckerman, 1994). Arguably, attractiveness is not central to identity, but tends to be socially desirable, and therefore low agreement in perceptions of this attribute are expected. Since instances of bias and idiosyncrasy provide the opportunity for people to see beyond their own perceptions, attractiveness is thus the ideal domain in which to examine the phenomena we are studying here.

Based on the results of several studies examining bias in partner judgments, Boyes & Fletcher conclude that positive biases are "consciously accessible to both partners" (2007). However, the question as to whether people have awareness of their partners' actual identity and reputation beyond their own positive impressions of their partners still remains unanswered. Therefore, we examined the extent to which romantic partners see the targets as attractive, know how attractive the targets see themselves, and know the extent to which others see the targets as attractive. Our empirical investigation of how people see their partners' attractiveness will help us shed light on the following question: Do romantic partners know one another realistically and uniquely, in spite of having overly positive perceptions? That is, do partners have very positive views of each other but also realize that others do not share those views? As Joe Crocker's song title in the title of this paper implies, we may indeed believe that our romantic partners are beautiful, but probably know that some of that beauty exists only when looking through our own rosy perceptual lenses.

Method

Participants and procedures.

Participants (also referred to as targets) in sample 1 were 91 Washington University undergraduates (33 male, 58 female; mean age = 19.8). Of the total sample, approximately 69.2% were Caucasian, 9.5% were Asian American, 6% were African American, 2.4% were Black, 1.1% were Latin American, 1.1% were Middle Eastern or Arab American, and about 4.8% described themselves as Multiracial. Participants in sample 2 were 69 Washington University undergraduates (30 male, 39 female; mean age = 19.8). Of the total sample, approximately 75.4% were Caucasian or described themselves as 'other,' 11.6% were Asian American, 7.2% were Latin American, 4.3% were African American, and 1.4% were Black. Both samples were subsets of larger studies[F1]. Students were recruited via the Psychology Department Human Subject Pool through which students signed up to participate for either course credit or monetary compensation. These students were asked to nominate 3-8 informants[F2] who knew them well and would be willing to complete an online questionnaire about the targets' personality. Targets included in the current analyses are individuals who had both a romantic partner and at least one peer (i.e., an unrelated friend or roommate) complete the online questionnaire. We distinguished between family members and unrelated peers (now termed friends) to eliminate biases from informants who were related to the targets. For targets with more than one friend rating, we aggregated their friends' ratings. We also used this aggregate as a measure of general reputation.

Within a laboratory setting, targets completed a questionnaire designed to assess self-perceptions, information about their relationships with their informants, and demographic information, as well as several other measures[F3]. Using the names and email

addresses provided by targets for their informants, research assistants emailed informants within one week of each target's participation explaining why the informant was contacted and with instructions for completing the online questionnaire (Vazire, 2006). Informants were also told that the targets would not have access to the informants' ratings. Up to three reminder emails (one time per week) were sent to informants. Informants were not compensated for their involvement. In sample 1, the romantic partners knew targets for an average of 2.2 years and the friends knew targets for an average of 4.7 years. In sample 2, the romantic partners knew targets for an average of 2.4 years and the friends knew targets for an average of 4.1 years.

Measures.

Participants in both samples provided self-perceptions on a questionnaire that included items to assess target identity (how targets see themselves) on attributes that range in degree of evaluativeness and importance in mate selection[F4]. Romantic partners and friends completed the same questionnaire, but instead of providing self-perceptions, these informants provided their own impressions of targets (how they perceive the targets) and their *perceived identity* ratings of targets (how informants believe the targets see themselves) for each item. Also, in sample 2 only, romantic partners provided their *perceived reputation* ratings of targets (how informants believe others see the targets).

Targets and informants completed several acquaintanceship items related to the duration and quality of their respective relationships with one another. Targets also completed a demographic questionnaire which included questions about gender, age, ethnicity, and major and year in school. Informants were only asked to provide their age and gender.

Analyses.

In all of our analyses examining positivity biases, we used the traditional social psychological approach of comparing mean levels of self- and informant-ratings. Specifically, we conducted a paired samples t-test separately for both samples comparing targets' self-perceptions, romantic partners' perceptions of targets, and friends' perceptions of targets.

In all of our analyses examining agreement, we used the traditional personality approach of correlating self-, romantic partner-, and friend-ratings with each other. Specifically, we standardized scores within sample, combined samples, and computed the Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between self-, romantic partner-, and friend-perceptions.

Results

Descriptive Statistics: Perceptions of Attractiveness

How attractive do people think their romantic partners are? The focus of this study was to examine romantic partners' knowledge of targets' identity and reputation beyond their own perceptions of targets' physical attractiveness. Before testing for evidence of identity accuracy and reputation accuracy, we examined the positivity of romantic partners' own perceptions. For each sample, we conducted separate paired samples t-tests comparing each of the following: self- vs. romantic partner-perceptions, self- vs. friend-perceptions, and romantic partner- vs. friend -perceptions. The results (Figure 1) indicate that both romantic partner- and friend-perceptions of targets are more positive than targets' self-perceptions. Romantic partner-perceptions of attractiveness

show the greatest degree of positivity (compared to self-perceptions, in sample 1: $t(79) =$ 11.31, $p < .01$; in sample 2: $t(63) = 10.82$, $p < .01$), followed by friends (compared to self-perceptions, in sample 1: $t(80) = 5.39$, $p < .01$; in sample 2: $t(64) = 3.81$, $p < .01$). Moreover, romantic partners' perceptions of targets are also significantly more positive than friends' perceptions of targets (sample 1: $t(87) = 5.06$, $p < .01$; in sample 2: $t(67) =$ 7.63, $p < .01$).

We also examined the correlation among romantic partners' ratings of attractiveness, friends' ratings, and targets' self-ratings. To examine this, we standardized scores within each sample, combined samples 1 and 2, and computed correlations among the three perceptions (self, friend, partner). The results show that self-partner agreement, $r = .10$ (*n.s.*), is weak, self-friend agreement, $r = .16$ ($p < .10$) is also weak, and friend-partner agreement, $r = .24$ ($p < .01$) is moderate. In other words, romantic partners do not agree with targets but do agree somewhat with friends. However, there are no significant differences among any pairs of correlations.

Overall, romantic partners and friends see targets more positively than targets see themselves and romantic partners see targets more positively than do friends. In addition, correlational analyses suggest that romantic partners do not agree with targets' self-views of attractiveness and agree only somewhat with friends. In other words, romantic partners' own perceptions of attractiveness are both positively biased and rather idiosyncratic. In light of these findings, we now examine to what extent romantic partners have knowledge of targets' identity and reputation - do they know that others do not share their rosy views?

Romantic Partner Identity Accuracy

Do romantic partners know how their partners see themselves on attractiveness? To shed light on this question, we examined romantic partner identity accuracy (romantic partners' knowledge of targets' self-views).

Means. First, separately for each sample, we conducted paired samples t-tests comparing romantic partners' *perceived identity* of targets (how romantic partners think targets see themselves) to targets' self-perceptions and to romantic partners' own perceptions of targets, respectively. As mentioned above, romantic partners' perceptions of targets are more positive than targets' self-perceptions. The results (Figure 2) indicate that when inferring targets' self-views, romantic partners' perceived identity ratings are less positive than their own impressions of targets (sample 1: $t(79) = -9.87$, $p < .01$; sample 2: $t(63) = -7.04$, $p < .01$), but are still more positive than targets' actual self-perceptions (sample 1: $t(79) = 1.77$, $p < .10$; sample 2: $t(63) = 2.12$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that although romantic partners see targets in an especially positive light, they know that their own perceptions are more positive than targets' self-perceptions. Nevertheless, they still overestimate the positivity of targets' self-perceptions.

Correlations.

In order to further examine the extent to which romantic partners achieve identity accuracy, we combined samples 1 and 2 (after standardizing scores within sample; N = 144) and computed the correlation between romantic partners' perceived identity of targets and targets' self-perceptions (identity accuracy). As described above, self-partner agreement was not significant ($r = .10$). However, the results for identity accuracy (Figure 4) indicate that romantic partners' ratings of how targets see themselves do correlate moderately with targets' self-reports ($r = .28$, $p < .01$), and this correlation is

significantly greater than the self-partner agreement correlation (using the Williams modification of Hotelling's t-test; Kenny, 1987: $t(144) = 1.69$, $p < .05$). This finding provides support for the hypothesis that romantic partners have knowledge of how attractive targets see themselves.

Finally, we computed a multiple regression testing whether romantic partners' perceived identity ratings better predict targets' actual self-perceptions than do romantic partners' own perceptions of targets. In our model we predicted targets' self-perceptions (DV) from romantic partners' perceived identity ratings, controlling for romantic partners' own impressions of targets. The results indicate that perceived identity ratings have incremental validity over romantic partners' own perceptions of targets' attractiveness when guessing targets' self-views, $\beta = .27$, $p < .01$.

Altogether, both mean level comparisons and correlational analyses provide evidence for romantic partner identity accuracy: romantic partners seem to have some awareness of how targets see themselves on attractiveness beyond their own perceptions of targets.

Friend Identity Accuracy.

Is the insight romantic partners have into the targets' identities unique, or do friends also have such insight? Examining friend identity accuracy provides a benchmark for drawing conclusions about the bias and accuracy in romantic partners' perceptions.

<u>**Means.**</u> First, separately for each sample, we conducted paired samples t-tests comparing friends' *perceived identity* of targets (how friends think targets see themselves) to targets' self-perceptions and to friends' own perceptions of targets, respectively. As mentioned above, friends' perceptions of targets are more positive than

targets' self-perceptions. The results (Figure 3) indicate that when inferring targets' self-views, friends' perceived identity ratings are less positive than their own impressions of targets (sample 1: $t(80) = -5.39$, $p < .05$; sample 2: $t(42) = -5.08$, $p < .05$), but are still more positive than targets' actual self-perceptions (sample 1: $t(80) = 2.04$, $p < .05$; sample 2: $t(42) = 2.42$, $p < .05$). These findings parallel those found for romantic partners, and suggest that although friends see targets in a positive light, they know that their own perceptions differ from how targets see themselves. Nevertheless, like romantic partners, friends overestimate the positivity of targets' self-perceptions.

Correlations.

We next examined the extent to which friends achieve identity accuracy using a correlational approach. As with romantic partners' ratings, we combined samples 1 and 2 (after standardizing scores within sample; N = 124) and computed the correlation between friends' perceived identity of targets and targets' self-perceptions (identity accuracy). As described above, self-friend agreement was weak ($r = .16$, $p < .10$). The results (Figure 4) indicate that friends' ratings of how targets see themselves correlate moderately with targets' self-reports ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), however this correlation is not significantly greater than the self-friend agreement correlation (using the Williams modification of Hotelling's t-test; Kenny, 1987: $t(124) = -0.76$, $p = .23$). This finding suggests that friends have some knowledge of targets' self-perceptions of attractiveness, but it is not much greater than the baseline level of self-friend agreement. Interestingly, friend identity accuracy ($r = .22$) and romantic partner identity accuracy ($r = .26$) were not significantly different from each other, $t(122) = 0.26$, $p = .40$.

The findings thus far suggest that both romantic partners and friends have some awareness of how their own perceptions of targets differ from targets' self-perceptions. We next tested whether romantic partners and friends have unique perceptions of targets' identity which predict targets' self-views independently from each other. To do so, we conducted a multiple regression in which we predicted targets' self-perceptions (DV) from romantic partners' perceived identity ratings and friends' perceived identity ratings. We found that both romantic partners' and friends' perceived identity ratings have unique predictive validity, $\beta = .23$, $p < .01$ and $\beta = .20$, $p < .05$, respectively. These results suggest that romantic partners and friends have unique, and equally valid, perceptions of the extent to which targets see themselves as attractive.

Reputation Accuracy.

Do romantic partners know how outsiders of the relationship see their partners' attractiveness? To shed light on this question, we examined romantic partner reputation accuracy (romantic partners' knowledge of targets' reputations, as measured by friend ratings). We conducted all analyses examining reputation accuracy using only data from sample 2 because *perceived reputation* ratings (how romantic partners think others see targets) were not collected in sample 1.

Means. First, we conducted paired samples t-tests comparing romantic partners' *perceived reputation* of targets to targets' reputations and to romantic partners' perceptions of targets, respectively. As mentioned above, romantic partners' perceptions of targets are more positive than targets' reputations (i.e., perceptions by friends). The results (Figure 5) indicate that romantic partners' perceived reputation ratings are less positive than their own impressions of targets ($t(67) = -5.90$, $p < .01$), but are still more

positive than targets' actual reputations ($t(67) = 3.89$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that although romantic partners see targets in an especially positive light, they know that their own perceptions differ from how outsiders of the relationship see targets (they have insight into their positive biases). Nevertheless, they still overestimate the positivity of others' perceptions. These results suggest that romantic partners have some reputation accuracy for attractiveness.

Correlations.

In order to further examine the extent to which romantic partners achieve reputation accuracy, we computed the correlation between romantic partners' perceived reputation of targets and targets' reputations (reputation accuracy). As described above, friend-partner agreement is moderate ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). More interestingly, the results (Figure 6) indicate that romantic partners' perceived reputation also correlates significantly with targets' reputations ($r = .54$, $p < .01$), and this correlation is significantly greater than the friend-partner agreement correlation (using the Williams modification of Hotelling's t-test; Kenny, 1987: $t(67) = 2.72$, $p < .05$). This finding suggests that romantic partners have knowledge of how outsiders of the relationship see targets on attractiveness, regardless of their own views.

As with similar findings for identity accuracy, both mean level comparisons and correlational analyses provide evidence for romantic partner reputation accuracy: romantic partners seem to have some awareness of how others see targets on attractiveness beyond their own perceptions of targets.

Discussion

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Given that romantic relationships are usually more intimate than other close relationships, romantic partners may have especially good insight into their partner's personality (Vazire & Solomon, in press). The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which people have a sophisticated level of knowledge about their romantic partners, which includes knowing more than one's own perception of their partner. The current findings suggest that romantic partners maintain both biased and realistic views through awareness that their own overly positive perceptions of their partners' attractiveness are discrepant from their partners' and friends' less positive views. In thinking back to Mike and Sarah, it may be the case that Mike sees Sarah as a 9 out of 10 on attractiveness, but knows that she only sees herself as a 6 and that her friends see her as a 7. Thus, in line with the title of this paper, Mike might indeed say to Sarah, "You are so beautiful… to me."

We tested the overarching hypothesis that romantic partners simultaneously have biased, realistic, and unique perceptions of their partners by examining the following hypotheses focused on attractiveness: H1a) romantic partners are positively biased in their own perceptions of targets; H1b) romantic partners have idiosyncratic perceptions (i.e., do not agree with targets or friends); H2) romantic partners know how targets see themselves (i.e., have identity accuracy); H3) identity accuracy is unique to romantic partners; H4) romantic partners know how others see targets (i.e., have reputation accuracy). Altogether, we found some evidence for most of these sub-hypotheses, thereby providing support for the notion that when it comes to attractiveness, couple members have idiosyncratic and especially positive perceptions of their partners, yet are still

realistic: they know that neither their partners nor outsiders of the relationship share their rosy views.

As an initial empirical investigation of the phenomena examined here, we examined perceptions of attractiveness in a sample of undergraduate dating couples. Given that positive biases are more prevalent for traits that are relationship relevant and central to romantic partner evaluation (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007), attractiveness provided an ideal domain for us to examine whether, while romantic partners see targets in especially biased and idiosyncratic ways, their perceptions are still tethered to reality; that is, whether they have identity and reputation accuracy. In relatively new relationships, couple members may constantly evaluate each other and be especially motivated to see their partners in an overly positive, yet realistic light. Thus, the sample we chose enabled us to examine partner-knowledge primarily among individuals who were in short-term relationships and were naturally still being evaluated by their partners.

Given that accuracy is operationalized differently in the social and personality literatures, utilizing a mean differences and a correlational statistical approach within the same study allowed us to understand how bias, agreement, and realism simultaneously exist in a novel way. Specifically, the current findings add to the literature by showing that the coexistence of bias and realism is not limited to different types of judgments or to perceptions of different traits in different situations. Romantic partners may be biased yet also realistic on even the same attribute – attractiveness.

How attractive do people think their romantic partners are?

To shed light on this question regarding how people actually see their romantic partners, we tested the extent to which positivity bias exists (H1a). Recall that we found

both romantic partners and friends to be biased relative to targets and romantic partners to be biased relative to friends, as well. The bias effect for romantic partners relative to targets is not surprising, as this finding is consistent with the current literature on positivity in romantic partners' perceptions. However, the finding that romantic partners were more biased than friends is noteworthy. Given that romantic partners and friends both see targets in a positive light, romantic partners' especially positive perceptions provide strong evidence that romantic partners are indeed positively biased in their perceptions of their partners' attractiveness. Since few studies have compared whether romantic partners are more positively biased than different types of close others, this result bolsters findings in the literature by using friend-perceptions as an outside benchmark criterion. Indeed, romantic partners see each other through rosier glasses than do others.

Next, we used a correlational approach to test the extent to which romantic partners have idiosyncratic perceptions (H1b). The results suggest that people seem to have rather idiosyncratic views of their romantic partners; that is, their perceptions do not correlate much with others' perceptions. The idiosyncrasy effect is especially interesting given that, while other attributes may have contextual variability, attractiveness is quite stable across situations. In other words, one could argue that when it comes to an attribute such as likeable, people's behaviors may vary when they are with different people resulting in low agreement about a person's likeability. With respect to attractiveness, however, high agreement between perceivers should be expected. This was clearly not the case between romantic partners' and targets' perceptions nor romantic partners' and

friends' perceptions, underscoring that people see their romantic partners through unique lenses.

After establishing that romantic partners' perceptions of targets' attractiveness are both biased and idiosyncratic, we examined the extent to which romantic partners are simultaneously biased and realistic. Having established bias, we next examined whether romantic partners are also realistic by testing for identity and reputation accuracy.

Do people know how their romantic partners see themselves on attractiveness?

We explored whether romantic partners maintain realistic views of targets, despite their biases, by first testing whether romantic partners know how targets see themselves (H2: they have identity accuracy). Recall that when using a mean differences approach, we found that romantic partners know that their own perceptions of targets are more positive than targets' self-views, but they still overestimate the positivity of targets' self-views. We also found that romantic partners' guesses about targets' self-views were moderately correlated with how targets actually see themselves. Moreover, this identity accuracy correlation was significantly greater than the self-partner agreement correlation. This difference suggests that romantic partners indeed have a sophisticated level of partner-knowledge; that is, partners are aware of how targets see themselves, beyond their own perceptions of targets.

Together, these results suggest that in spite of their biases, romantic partners also maintain realistic views. If knowing another person well includes knowing more than one's own perception of their partner, then testing for identity accuracy serves as a valid measure of realism. Specifically, identity accuracy implies that romantic partners can see

beyond their own biased views and have a) awareness that they see targets more positively than targets see themselves and b) insight into targets' actual identities.

Self-verification theory is based on the notion that people desire to be seen by others as they see themselves (Swann et al., 1994). However, conclusions in the literature are mixed suggesting that while couple members in satisfying romantic relationships indeed see each other as they see themselves (Luo & Snider, 2010), they also see other in an overly positive light (Murray et al., 1996). To reconcile this paradox, we turn to the potential utility of identity accuracy. In other words, perhaps what is most important is not being seen by a romantic partner as one sees herself, but having a romantic partner who knows how one sees herself and still personally sees her positively. In this way, achieving identity accuracy enables couples members to simultaneously feel understood and treasured.

Is the insight romantic partners have into the targets' identities unique?

By examining friend-knowledge, we were able to test the hypothesis (H3) that one component of partner-knowledge, identity accuracy, is unique. If supported, results would show that unlike romantic partners, friends do not have insight into targets' self-views of attractiveness. Recall that we found that friends know that their own perceptions of targets are more positive than targets' self-views, but like romantic partners, still overestimate targets' self-views. We also found that friends' guesses about targets' self-views were moderately correlated with how targets actually see themselves. This identity accuracy correlation was not significantly greater than the self-friend agreement correlation. While there was no difference between friend identity accuracy and self-

friend agreement, there was statistically less opportunity for a difference to exist, given that friends already somewhat agreed with targets' self-views of attractiveness.

Interestingly, these friend identity accuracy findings are similar to the results for romantic partners: romantic partners and friends both know that they see targets more positively than targets see themselves, yet they underestimate the extent to which their perceptions are more positive. Also, romantic partners and friends both agree with targets when rating how targets see themselves. Since, compared to romantic partners, friends were less positively biased and also agreed more with targets in their perceptions of targets' attractiveness, one might assume that friends would be more accurate in guessing targets' self-views. However, our third hypothesis was based on the notion that relative to friends, romantic partners likely have greater motivation to understand targets, as well as greater access to targets' self-disclosures, and would therefore have unique insight into how targets see themselves. Thus, we expected that romantic partners would have greater insight into targets' actual self-views than would friends. However, the evidence for friend identity accuracy does not support our hypothesis that identity accuracy is unique to romantic partners.

In some ways, the identity accuracy effect for romantic partners seems more impressive than for friends, given that romantic partners have particularly strong biased and idiosyncratic views of targets' attractiveness which could make it more difficult to see beyond their own perspectives. The finding is in line with the notion that people have a sophisticated level of knowledge about their romantic partners; in spite of their especially positive perceptions, they still have insight into each other's self-views.

On the other hand, when interpreting the identity accuracy effect for friends, it is especially impressive that friends have awareness of targets' less positive perceptions and actual self-views, given that friends' and targets' perceptions start off as more similar. In other words, relative to the large discrepancy between romantic partners' and targets' perceptions, the closeness of friends' and targets' perceptions might have made distinguishing between their own and targets' views more difficult for friends. In spite of this difficulty, friends still have insight into targets' self-views.

Given that this study only focused on perceptions of attractiveness, it may be the case that romantic partners uniquely achieve identity accuracy on other types of individual differences, such as self-esteem or anxiety, which are more internal and covert. Based on the SOKA model (Vazire, 2010), such traits are typically known better to the self than to others, but a romantic partner may have privileged access to the relevant information more so than friends.

While our results suggest that both romantic partners and friends have the same degree of insight into targets' identities, we conducted a more direct, yet exploratory, test to examine uniqueness in romantic partners' perceptions. Recall that the results from the multiple regression analysis suggest that romantic partners and friends both have unique, and equally valid, perceptions of the extent to which targets see themselves as attractive. Since we did not use other comparison groups (e.g., parents, siblings, roommates, etc.) as predictors, we cannot definitively claim that romantic partners have unique perceptions, but at least when compared to friends, the evidence suggests that their insight is indeed somewhat unique. Given that people tend to have only one romantic partner at a time, this might help explain why people choose their respective romantic partners; while

partners may not have more knowledge than others, there may be some ineffable

uniqueness in their understanding and perceptions of each other.

Do romantic partners know how outsiders of the relationship see their partners'

attractiveness?

We explored another way for realism to exist in romantic partners' perceptions by

testing whether romantic partners know targets' reputations (H4: they have reputation

accuracy). Recall that we found that romantic partners know that their own perceptions of

targets are more positive than targets' reputations, but still overestimate the positivity of

targets' reputations. We also found that romantic partners' guesses about targets'

reputations were significantly correlated with how others actually see targets. Moreover,

this reputation accuracy correlation was significantly greater than the friend-partner

agreement correlation. This difference is especially notable, given that friend and

romantic partner perceptions are both types of other-perceptions (which tend to be highly

correlated in studies that examine agreement in different contexts, across types of

informants; e.g., John & Robins, 1993; Leising, Erbs, & Fritz, 2010; Malloy, Albright,

Diaz-Loving, Dong, & Lee, 2004). Thus, this finding serves as strong evidence that

romantic partners indeed have a sophisticated level of partner-knowledge; that is, partners

are aware of how targets are seen by others, beyond their own perceptions of targets.

Based on these findings, romantic partner reputation accuracy exists. At least when it

comes to attractiveness, partners demonstrate that they remain tethered to reality, even if

they personally disagree with others.

These findings are particularly interesting because reputation accuracy seems to

serve as another tactic for people to simultaneously hold positive and realistic views of

their partners. While it may be easier for romantic partners to reconcile disagreement with targets about their levels of attractiveness (given that each target is only one person), knowing targets' reputations (each of which is an aggregate of several friends' perceptions) yet still retaining their own biased views probably requires greater rationalization and perceptual gymnastics. Given that we do not know whether romantic partners think they are more accurate than friends or vice versa, we can only go as far as saying that romantic partners know that they think their partners are especially attractive while others do not.

Together, these results suggest that in spite of their biases, romantic partners maintain realistic views in two ways: by knowing that their own perceptions are more positive than targets' self-perceptions and targets' reputations. Again, if knowing another person well includes knowing more than one's own perception of their partner, then testing for reputation accuracy also serves as another valid measure of realism. Specifically, along with identity accuracy, reputation accuracy implies that romantic partners can see beyond their own biased views.

How do identity accuracy and reputation accuracy contribute to partner-knowledge?

Knowing another person well may require more than having an accurate impression of them. Specifically, regardless of the accuracy of one's own impression, there may be three components necessary to really knowing someone: a) knowing the target's identity, b) knowing the target's reputation, and c) knowing how the target actually is (her actual personality). We consider having such knowledge to be a sophisticated skill, given that it requires the ability to see beyond one's own perceptions.

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Of the three components we assert as being necessary for optimally knowing someone, the results of the current study suggest that when it comes to knowledge of targets' attractiveness, romantic partners have positive and idiosyncratic views of the targets, yet a) have insight into how the targets see themselves (identity accuracy) and b) have insight into how others see the targets (reputation accuracy). As for the third component of knowing the targets' actual levels of attractiveness, this brings up the thorny problem of how to define absolute accuracy. Identity and reputation accuracy are useful constructs for the very reason that they circumvent this criterion problem by asking whether romantic partners know targets' identity and reputation, which both have clear criteria (i.e., targets' self-views and targets' friends' views, respectively). In sum, this study presents a novel mechanism by which couple members are able to simultaneously maintain biased and realistic perceptions of each other.

The majority of findings showing that bias and accuracy coexist seem to be based on the underlying theory that there is adaptive value in having biased perceptions in certain circumstances and accurate perceptions in others. Despite robust findings in the relationships literature suggesting that couples show both bias and agreement in their perceptions (e.g., successful romantic relationships are characterized by positive bias on global attributes and accuracy in perceptions of partners' specific traits (Neff & Karney, 2005), to our knowledge the question as to whether bias and realism (e.g., accuracy) coexist on the *same* traits has not been addressed, that is, until now. We believe that the evidence we have presented here implies a sophisticated level of knowledge, operating to fulfill motives driven by both esteem- and epistemic-related needs (i.e., people are motivated to see and be seen by their partners in positive and realistic ways). The results

presented here provide support for the claim that the positive biases in romantic partners' perceptions are "consciously accessible" (Boyes & Fletcher, 2007). Indeed, the results show that people have insight into the notion that their views of their partners may be positively biased and idiosyncratic.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study identified novel ways to demonstrate how romantic partners can be both biased and realistic in their perceptions of each other (through identity and reputation accuracy), the findings are based only on attractiveness. Whether romantic partners achieve identity accuracy and reputation accuracy for other traits remains unknown. For instance, it may be the case that couple members maintain realism through knowledge of identity and reputation primarily when perceiving socially desirable characteristics and relationship relevant traits (about which they are motivated to see their partners in especially biased ways).

Similarly, knowing someone well may not always require knowledge of identity and reputation. For instance, high self-other agreement exists among well-acquainted dyads for less evaluative traits such as the Big Five (John & Robins, 1993; Vazire & Carlson, 2010). In such cases where high agreement exists among targets, romantic partners, and friends, it is possible that romantic partners do not have biased or idiosyncratic views. Therefore, achieving identity and reputation accuracy as a way to maintain realism would be unnecessary. Future research should examine romantic partners' knowledge of identity and reputation for a diverse group of traits to test whether the phenomena illustrated in the current study exist when perceiving individual differences other than attractiveness.

Understanding what people know about their partners on a range of attributes may have important implications for relationship outcomes. For instance, similar to Swann's self-verification theory which explains the desire to be seen by one's partner as one sees herself (Swann et al., 1994), people probably feel better understood when their romantic partners know their self-views. Thus, having identity accuracy on a variety of traits may help partners feel validated. Also, given the great extent to which friends and family influence relationships, it is possible that when people know how others see their partners, they may be more susceptible to identifying red flags, or the opposite, seeing something good about their partner that they did not recognize on their own. In this case, having reputation accuracy on a variety of traits may help partners know more about each other. Whether it is feeling understood or noticing new characteristics based upon outsiders' perspectives, knowledge of identity and reputation may impact experiences, expectations, and satisfaction in relationships.

In this vein, future research should examine whether people who have identity accuracy and reputation accuracy are any happier or more satisfied in their relationships. For instance, are people with partners who know how they see themselves and how others outside the relationship see them better (or worse) off than people whose partners are clueless about their identity and reputation? In other words, examining whether knowledge of a partner's identity and reputation is associated with and can predict outcomes such as wellbeing, partner satisfaction, and relationship stability might help explain what characteristics make a relationship successful.

Finally, further research on bias and accuracy in romantic relationships should continue including friends' perceptions. Examining friends' perceptions provides a

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benchmark for drawing conclusions about bias, realism, and uniqueness in romantic

partners' perceptions. For instance with respect to accuracy, it is not clear whether

romantic couples' perceptions are accurate or whether instances of self-partner

agreement interpreted as accuracy are merely *folie a deux* (delusions transmitted and

shared within a pair). Moreover, comparisons with friends can help shed light on which

aspects of partner-knowledge are unique and which also exist in other close relationships.

Perhaps if we can identify the uniqueness that characterizes satisfying romantic

relationships, we can better understand the components necessary for appropriate mate

selection and successful relationships.

Footnotes

[1] Participants in sample 1 were from two separate studies ($N = 328; 143$). Participants in sample 2 were from three separate studies conducted the following academic year, but within the same year as each other ($N = 92; 86; 202$).

[2] The total number of informants requested for nomination differed between studies (ranging from 3-8).

[3] Because the samples are subsets of several larger studies, targets completed other tasks as part of their participation including: an unstructured interaction with another participant, several questionnaires regarding their perceptions of their interaction partner and their perceptions how they believe their partners and informants perceive their own personality (meta-perceptions), and other measures assessing a range of psychological constructs (e.g., mindfulness, narcissism, attachment). The data collected from such tasks were not used in the current analyses.

[4] Trained research assistants rated the extent to which they believed each of the attributes on the target and informant questionnaires were evaluative on a 7-point Likert scale (*0 not evaluative at all to 7 extremely evaluative*). The ratings were aggregated to determine which traits were perceived as the most evaluative. Attractiveness was among the top five evaluative traits and is also perceived as important in mate selection (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Rowatt et al., 2001).

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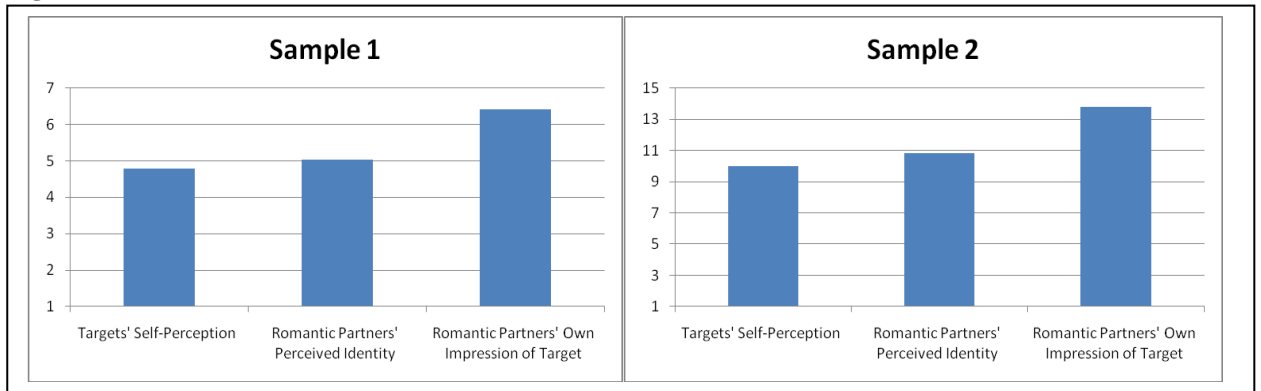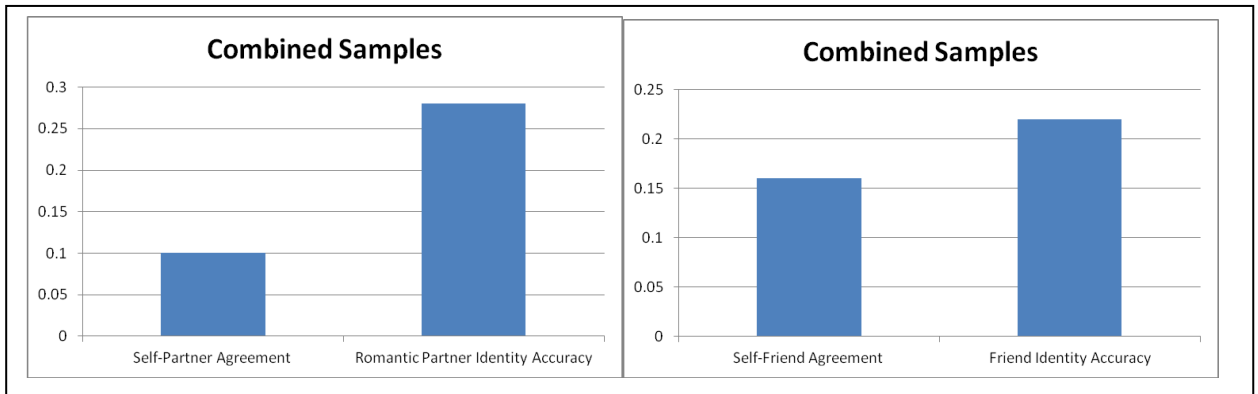
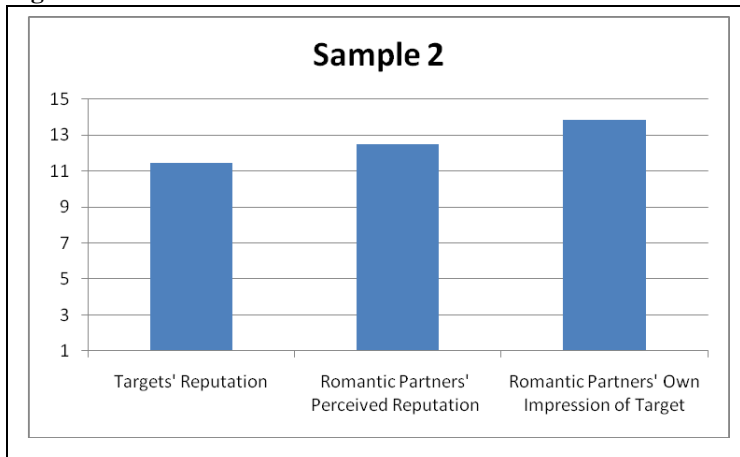Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6