

Ideals, Perceptions, and Evaluations in Early Relationship Development

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This research examined partner and relationship perceptions and ideal standards in 100 individuals over time, from the 1st to the 12th month of their dating relationships. As expected, the results revealed that (a) individuals evaluated their relationships on both distinct evaluative components and global evaluative dimensions, (b) higher ideal-perception consistency was associated with higher perceived quality of relationships and partners, (c) more positive perceptions of partners and relationships at earlier points in time were associated with more importance being placed on relevant ideals over time but not vice versa, and (d) higher levels of ideal-perception consistency predicted lower rates of relationship dissolution but were mediated through perceptions of relationship quality. These results support the ideal standards model (Fletcher & Simpson, in press).

Although there has been considerable research investigating the development of intimate relationships, the study of the very early stages in dating relationships remains uncharted territory. In this research, we tracked 100 participants across the first 3 to 4 months of their dating relationships (with a 1-year follow-up). Our aims were to investigate the functions of partner and relationship ideals and to determine how both are related to current perceptions and evaluations of relationships during the likely turmoil and lability of early relationship development.

This study is couched within a social cognitive perspective and is based on the ideal standards model developed by Fletcher, Simpson, and colleagues (Fletcher & Simpson, in press; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2000) and Higgins's self-discrepancy model (Higgins, 1987). Our model argues that the consistency between ideal standards (that may predate specific relationships) and partner and relationship perceptions (henceforth termed *ideal-perception consistency*) serves three basic functions in intimate relationships: evaluation, explanation, and regulation. Given that these functions or goals are likely to be especially important during the early stages of intimate relationships, ideal standards should be chronically accessible and often pressed into service in this context.

Prior research has shown that the more closely individuals' ideal standards match their perceptions of their current partners in long-term stable relationships, the more positively they evaluate their current relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, in press; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). We predicted the same basic findings would be found in the very early stages of dating relationships.

Another aim of this study was to examine the links between ideals and perceptions in early relationship development. There are three plausible yet distinct models available. First, a cognitive consistency or balance model states that individuals strive for perceived consistency between ideals and perceptions. This model implies that perceptions and ideals should influence one another equally across time. Second, a schema model posits that ideals should be used as templates that allow partner and relationship mental models to be filled in (e. g., if I know that my partner is attractive, I might guess that he or she is also an extrovert). This model implies that ideals should influence perceptions across time. Third, theories that stress the need for individuals to maintain positive relationship impressions postulate that individuals will be motivated to bring their ideals into line with perceptions of their partners and relationships (see, e.g., Murray et al., 1996). This last model predicts that perceptions should influence ideals across time. Using cross-lagged analyses, we predicted that the third model would fit the data best for two reasons, in addition to the motivation to maintain "positivity." First, ideal standards are likely to be less constrained by reality than partner perceptions. Second, ideal standards may not serve as particularly good or realistic schemas for guiding current perceptions (compared with, e.g., stereotypes or prototypes).

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On the basis of the hypothesis that ideals should serve regulatory functions in relationships, we predicted that lower ideal-perception consistency should predict higher relationship breakup rates. However, voluminous evidence shows that more negative relationship evaluations also predict greater dissolution in dating relationships (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997; Simpson, 1987; Van Lange et al., 1997), and we already have evidence that higher consistency between ideals and partner-relationship perceptions is associated with increased perceived relationship quality. The ideal standards model (Fletcher & Simpson, in press) argues that relationship evaluations comprise pivotal mental components that people access and use automatically to generate decisions and judgments, such as leave-or-stay judgments. Accordingly, we expected that the association between the consistency of perception-ideal discrepancies and the occurrence of breakups should be mediated by negative relationship evaluations.

In this study, we used two recently developed and standardized measures that assess domain-specific components of both ideals (Fletcher et al., 1999) and perceived relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) rather than the more typical research approach that relies on global measures. Use of these componential measures allows fine-grained analyses of the connections between specific kinds of ideals (e.g., Warmth/Trustworthiness, Vitality/Passion) and specific perceived relationship quality components (e.g., Trust, Satisfaction, Commitment). This approach also allowed us to address a longstanding issue in relationship science; namely, whether sentiment override leads individuals to judge their relationships in global evaluative terms or whether individuals make domain-specific evaluations.

To summarize, we predicted that (a) higher consistency between ideals and partner-relationship perceptions would be associated with greater perceived relationship quality, (b) dimensions on which the current partner or relationship were rated more positively early in the relationship (e.g., Vitality/Passion) would predict higher ratings on the same dimension for the ideal partner and relationship at later periods but not vice-versa, and (c) both greater ideal-perception consistency and more positive assessments of relationship quality would predict a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution over time. In addition, we expected that perceived relationship quality would mediate the link between ideal-perception consistency and relationship dissolution.

Method

Participants

Participants were 65 women and 35 men who were students attending the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. All participants had been dating their current partner in a heterosexual relationship for 4 weeks or less and were paid \$30 for participating in the study. The mean age of the sample was 20.90 years ($SD = 4.60$ years). The mean length of time dating at the first data collection period was 3.15 weeks ($SD = 0.91$ weeks). None of the participants were in relationships with other people in the sample. All respondents reported on the same dating relationship at each measurement phase.¹

Procedure

All participants completed several scales (individually, in the laboratory) during the first data-collection phase. They then returned at 1-month intervals on two more occasions and either completed the same battery of scales or notified the experimenter that their relationships had ended.

Participants who were still dating the same partner at the third data collection phase were contacted 9 months later by telephone. If they were still dating the same partner at the follow-up, participants answered a short version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000).

Scales

At each data-collection phase, participants reported their age, gender, relationship status (dating, living together, or married), and the length of their current dating relationship. They were then asked to describe (in writing) the relationship in their own words in a full and candid fashion. The following scales were then completed. Internal reliabilities and test-retest reliabilities are reported in Tables 1 and 2. They ranged from acceptable to excellent.²

Partner and relationship ideals. The Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales (Fletcher et al., 1999) contain 69 items that form three partner ideal subscales (Warmth/Trustworthiness, Vitality/Attractiveness, and Status/Resources) and two relationship ideal subscales (Intimacy/Loyalty and Passion). For the partner ideal subscales, participants are instructed to rate each item (e.g., kind, warm, sexy) "in terms of its importance in describing your ideal partner in a close relationship (dating, living together, or married)" (see Fletcher et al., 1999). Each item is accompanied by a 7-point Likert-type scale, anchored as follows: "1 = [this attribute is] very unimportant" and "7 = [this attribute is] very important." For the two relationship ideal subscales, the instructions and scales are identical except that participants are asked to rate each item (e.g., caring, honest, romantic) "in terms of its importance in describing your ideal close relationship (dating, living together, or married)" (see Fletcher et al., 1999).

All five subscales possess good internal reliability, test-retest reliability, convergent validity, and predictive validity (see Fletcher et al., 1999; Campbell et al., in press). Internal reliabilities and test-retest correlations for these subscales in the present study were generally good and consistent with those reported in Fletcher et al. (1999). Replicating Fletcher et al.'s (1999) work, the Relationship Intimacy/Loyalty and Relationship Passion Ideal subscales were substantially correlated with the Partner Warmth/Trustworthiness and Partner Vitality/Attractiveness scales, respectively, in the present sample (r s ranged from .56 to .87 across the three data-collection phases). Thus, the relevant ideal scales were summed across Relationship and Partner scales to produce three general ideal scores: Warmth/Loyalty, Vitality/Passion, and Status/Resources.

Partner and relationship perceptions. The Partner and Relationship Perception Scales contained the same items as the Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales, but participants were instructed to rate each item on 7-point Likert-type scales in terms of how accurately it described either their current partner (1 = *not at all like my partner*, 7 = *very much like my partner*) or their current relationship (1 = *not at all like my relationship*, 7 = *very much like my relationship*). Items were then summed to produce the same general perception measures previously described for the Partner and Relationship Ideal Scales.

Measure of consistency between ideals and perceptions of partner and relationship. The items from the five ideal scales and the related items from the perception scales were first summed to produce five ideal scores and five perception scores for each participant (three partner-based ideals and two relationship-based ideals). Within-subject correlations were then calculated between each set of ideal ratings and the equivalent ratings of perceived qualities of the current partner and relationship, which served as

¹ Other scales were also completed at this time but are not described in this study or published elsewhere.

² Gender differences are not reported in the current study because (a) they were not the focus, and (b) the distribution of women and men was unbalanced in our sample. However, when gender differences were controlled, they did not qualify the main findings reported here.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients for the Four Measurement Phases

Variables	Month 1 (n = 100)			Month 2 (n = 78)			Month 3 (n = 54)			Month 12 (n = 34)		
	Rel.	M	SD	Rel.	M	SD	Rel.	M	SD	Rel.	M	SD
Ideal-perception consistency <i>rs</i>	—	0.46	0.50	—	0.54	0.54	—	0.67	0.46	—	—	—
Ideals												
Warmth/Loyalty	.91	6.07	0.52	.95	6.04	0.63	.95	6.15	0.50	—	—	—
Vitality/Passion	.87	5.31	0.73	.91	5.40	0.75	.91	5.49	0.57	—	—	—
Status/Resources	.82	3.48	1.07	.77	3.79	1.07	.84	4.07	0.92	—	—	—
Current perceptions												
Warmth/Loyalty	.96	5.89	0.73	.96	5.78	0.82	.97	6.10	0.72	—	—	—
Vitality/Passion	.91	5.45	0.78	.92	5.47	0.77	.91	5.62	0.70	—	—	—
Status/Resources	.64	4.86	0.98	.69	4.86	1.01	.73	5.04	0.92	—	—	—
Positivity relationship description	.68	4.75	1.04	.80	4.44	1.30	.85	4.86	1.34			
Relationship quality components												
Trust	.78	6.12	0.93	.81	6.14	0.84	.91	6.37	0.89	6.71	0.68	
Satisfaction	.91	5.65	1.18	.96	5.45	1.32	.94	5.96	0.97	5.23	1.68	
Commitment	.96	5.40	1.51	.94	5.50	1.43	.95	6.04	1.13	5.82	1.38	
Closeness	.86	5.35	1.18	.88	5.50	1.17	.73	6.01	0.65	5.71	1.36	
Passion	.86	5.14	1.42	.85	5.20	1.43	.82	5.46	1.13	5.03	1.51	
Love	.89	4.97	1.46	.81	5.29	1.19	.73	5.81	0.99	5.76	1.33	
Romance	.75	4.67	1.28	.78	4.40	1.35	.73	4.93	1.12	4.68	1.59	

Note. Ideal-perception consistency scores are within-subject correlations, and the remaining scores have been recalculated as 7-point scales. Reliabilities for the ideal-perception consistency correlations are not provided because this is a single-item measure. Reliabilities for the positivity of relationship description are correlations between ratings of the two coders. Rel. = internal reliability. Dashes indicate data were not collected.

the measure of ideal-perception consistency. These correlations were converted to Fisher *z* scores to produce more normal distributions (and were then converted back in reporting the means).³ We used the full five ideal categories (not three as described previously) to calculate the ideal-perception consistency measures, in order to pick up any differences across relationship and partner-based ideals (even though they were correlated across targets).

This method of measuring consistency between ideals and current perceptions was chosen because (a) it produced a single index that was not confounded with either response biases or mean levels of positivity in judgments of either ideals or the current partner and relationship, and (b) it avoided the use of difference scores—a practice that can produce uninterpretable or misleading results when such scores are correlated with other variables (see Evans, 1991).

Relationship quality. The free-response descriptions were rated independently by two raters according to the overall positivity of the descriptions, using a Likert-type 7-point scale (7 = *very positive*, 1 = *very negative*). The scores were summed across the two raters to produce one measure of the positivity of the free-response relationship descriptions.

The PRQC inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000) measures six components (Love, Passion, Commitment, Trust, Satisfaction, and Closeness). Three items assess each component on 7-point Likert-type scales. A confirmatory factor analysis (see Fletcher et al., 2000) confirmed good internal reliabilities for each first-order construct and a good fit for the model in which the indicator variables loaded on the 6 first-order constructs, which in turn loaded on a second-order factor representing overall perceived relationship quality.

For this research, we added Romance as a 7th first-order relationship quality component (using the same design and measurement strategy previously adopted). Romance was assessed with 3 items: "How romantic is your relationship?"; "To what extent do you and your partner go out of your way to make each other feel special?"; and "To what extent do you and your partner surprise each other with small gifts, such as notes, cards, flowers, and special treats?"

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to replicate the findings obtained by Fletcher et al. (2000). Each relationship quality component (subscale) was treated as a latent factor that was estimated by three

indicator variables (the 3 subscale items). These 7 latent, domain-specific relationship quality factors were then treated as indicators of a single, second-order factor representing overall relationship quality. Data for this analysis came from all 100 participants who completed the PRQC scales in Phase 1. The overall fit of the model was satisfactory, comparative fit index (CFI) = .92, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08; Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2(182, N = 100) = 290, p < .002$. It also provided a significantly better fit than a simpler model in which the 21 items were treated as single indicator (observed) variables that all loaded on one latent variable of relationship quality, CFI = .52, RMSEA = .18; Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2(189, N = 100) = 726, p < .001$; difference in fit was $\chi^2(7, N = 100) = 436, p < .001$. These results indicate that participants were not rating the different relationship quality categories simply according to a general positivity dimension.

Finally, if they were still dating the same partner, participants answered a short version of the PRQC scales in a telephone interview 12 months after completing Phase 1. This version of the PRQC scales contained only the 7 items that assessed each relationship quality component most directly (see Fletcher et al., 2000).

Results

Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics and internal reliabilities for all scales are shown in Table 1. Of the 100 participants who completed the first testing phase, 78 were still dating the same partner 1 month later,

³ Two other measures were also used to assess ideal-perception consistency. The first measure adopted the same method already described but used the unstandardized paths rather than the correlations. The second method extracted 15 specific ideal items as exemplars (3 from each ideal category) and calculated within-subject correlations between ideals and relevant perceptions. Both measures revealed very similar results to those reported.

Table 2
Longitudinal Correlations Across the Three Measurement Phases

Variables	M1-M2 (n = 78)	M2-M3 (n = 54)	M1-M3 (n = 54)	M1-M12 (n = 34)	M2-M12 (n = 34)	M3-M12 (n = 34)
Ideal-perception consistency <i>r</i> s	.41*	.65*	.31*	—	—	—
Ideals						
Warmth/Loyalty	.88*	.85*	.78*	—	—	—
Vitality/Passion	.76*	.84*	.64*	—	—	—
Status/Resources	.84*	.87*	.82*	—	—	—
Current perceptions						
Warmth/Loyalty	.74*	.70*	.56*	—	—	—
Vitality/Passion	.74*	.74*	.68*	—	—	—
Status/Resources	.72*	.78*	.65*	—	—	—
Positivity relationship description	.62*	.62*	.68*	—	—	—
Relationship quality components						
Trust	.62*	.55*	.55*	.03	.18	.45*
Satisfaction	.46*	.35*	.32*	.34	.35*	.58*
Commitment	.69*	.59*	.59*	.57*	.41*	.60*
Closeness	.52*	.35*	.26	-.16	-.05	.30
Passion	.55*	.62*	.47*	-.18	.06	.44*
Love	.76*	.64*	.50*	.53*	.40*	.36*
Romance	.61*	.72*	.42*	.38*	.39*	.50*

Note. M = Month. Dashes indicate data were not collected.
* *p* < .05.

and 54 were still dating at the end of the 3rd month. Nine months later (1 year after Phase 1), 34 participants were still dating the same partner. All scales maintained good-to-excellent internal reliabilities across the first three testing phases. The pattern of means for the ideals were similar to those previously found (see Fletcher et al., 1999). Specifically, all of the ideal dimensions were rated highly, except for the Partner Status/Resources dimension. The mean ratings of perceptions of the current partner and relationship were also positive (and negatively skewed), even during the 1st month of the relationship.

Domain-Specific Relationship Quality Judgments

Each set of 7 relationship quality component means for the four research phases was tested using 1 × 7 (PRQC subscale) within-subject analyses of variance (ANOVAs). The ANOVAs for the four research phases were all significant: Phase 1, *F*(6, 594) = 24.38, *p* < .001; Phase 2, *F*(6, 462) = 23.17, *p* < .001; Phase 3, *F*(6, 318) = 21.99, *p* < .001; and Phase 4, *F*(6, 198) = 17.66, *p* < .001. All means within each measurement phase were tested for significant differences using dependent *t*

tests with a Bonferroni adjustment (set at *p* < .002) to adjust for Type 1 errors (see Table 3).

The same general pattern of means for the relationship quality components emerged across all four research phases. Trust consistently received the highest overall rating, and it usually was significantly higher than all other component means. In contrast, Romance was rated the lowest, typically significantly lower than all other components. The other subscales (Satisfaction, Commitment, Closeness, Passion, and Love) had relatively high ratings that were quite similar, falling between Trust and Romance at each measurement phase.

Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Correlations

The longitudinal correlations, shown in Table 2, revealed reasonable stability across the 3-month period in terms of ideal ratings, perceptions of the current partner and relationship, and relationship quality ratings. The stability from the first 3 months to the 12th month for the relationship quality components from the PRQC scales was comparatively uneven, with 13 of the 22 correlations being positive and significant. However, the internal reli-

Table 3
Significant Post Hoc Comparisons Between Mean Relationship Quality Components for the Four Measurement Phases

Variables	Trust	Satisfaction	Commitment	Closeness	Passion	Love	Romance
Trust	—	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 4	1, 2, 4	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 3, 4
Satisfaction		—			1	1	1, 2, 3
Commitment			—		4	1	1, 2, 3, 4
Closeness				—	3, 4	1	1, 2, 3
Passion					—	4	2
Love						—	2, 3, 4
Romance							—

Note. Comparisons between variables are significant at *p* < .002 only in cells in which numbers are present. 1 = Month 1 comparison; 2 = Month 2 comparison; 3 = Month 3 comparison; 4 = Month 12 comparison.

ability coefficients and the total set of test-retest results generally indicated that the PRQC scales were reliable.

The cross-sectional correlations at each testing phase are shown in Table 4. As predicted, if participants placed more importance on a particular category of ideals, they also perceived their current partner and relationship as possessing the same characteristics to a significantly greater degree. This pattern was consistent across ideal categories and across each time period. However, the correlations between the measures of ideal-perception consistency and the relationship quality measures revealed a more inconsistent pattern (even though 16 of the 24 correlations were significant and positive). In general, greater ideal-perception consistency was associated with higher relationship quality. The size of these correlations tended to increase over the 3-month period.⁴

Associations Over Time Between Ideals and Perceptions of the Partner and Relationship

Our general model is shown in Figure 1. Path A represents the extent to which ideals at earlier times predict later relationship perceptions, and Path B represents the extent to which earlier relationship perceptions predict later ideals. A SEM approach was used, which allows paths to be estimated simultaneously and differences in paths to be tested for significance.

The results of the nine cross-lagged analyses are displayed in Table 5. Three sets of analyses were carried out using the three scales that measured both perceptions of ideals and the current partner and relationship: Warmth/Loyalty, Vitality/Passion, and Status/Resources. Of the nine paths proceeding from perceptions of the current partner or relationship to the relevant ideals dimension (Path B in Figure 1), four were positive and significant at $p < .05$. In contrast, none of the nine paths from ideal ratings to perceptions of the current partner or relationship (Path A in Figure 1) were significant at $p < .05$. Of the significant A paths, two were significantly higher than the equivalent B paths at the $p < .05$ level, while one other path (Vitality/Passion at Month 2) was marginally significant ($p = .056$). As predicted, these results suggest that people who remained in their relationships over the

first 3 months changed their ideal standards to fit their perceptions of their current partners and relationships rather than vice versa.

Alternative Explanations

One set of alternative explanations involves possible statistical artifacts. Specifically, different cross-lagged paths can be produced if the internal reliability of one pair of variables varies over time whereas the other pair does not. This is not likely to be a problem in our analyses, given the high stability of the internal reliabilities for ideals and perceptions at all measurement phases (see Table 1). A second possible artifact concerns differences in longitudinal correlations between the two pairs of variables. To formally test this possibility, the SEM analyses already reported were repeated with the constraint that the two longitudinal paths in each analysis were forced to be equal. The cross-lagged results did not change.

A third possible artifact involves whether different samples might have been used in the cross-lagged and correlational analyses, depending on which phase of the data was being analyzed (see Tables 5 and 6). To test whether this was a problem, we recalculated all of the results for the cross-lagged and correlational analyses involving the Month 1 and Month 2 data but only using the sample that remained at Month 3 ($N = 54$). The results were not different from those just reported.⁵

Predicting Relationship Dissolution

At Month 3, 46 relationships had broken up and 54 were continuing. Two discriminant function analyses were conducted to predict breakup at Month 3. The positivity of the relationship description (coded by trained raters), the 7 PRQC scales, and the consistency between ideals and current perceptions of the partner and relationship served as the predictor variables for Month 1 ($N = 100$) and Month 2 ($N = 78$).

The results, shown in Table 6, revealed that higher scores on both the 7 PRQC scales and the relationship description were generally consistent predictors of relationship continuance at Month 3. Higher ideal-perception consistency at Month 2 also predicted lower rates of breakup at Month 3. Predicting Month 3 breakup from the Month 1 variables ($N = 100$) produced a significant canonical correlation of .50 ($p < .001$): 72% of participants' eventual relationship status was correctly predicted. Predicting Month 3 breakup from the Month 2 variables ($N = 74$) also produced a significant canonical correlation

Table 4
Cross-Sectional Correlations for the Three Measurement Phases

Correlations	Month 1 ($n = 100$)	Month 2 ($n = 78$)	Month 3 ($n = 54$)
Ideals-perceptions			
Warmth/Loyalty	.64*	.60*	.49*
Vitality/Passion	.45*	.38*	.64*
Status/Resources	.36*	.38*	.40*
I-P consistency			
With relation. qual. components			
Trust	.15	.34*	.45*
Satisfaction	.19	.37*	.52*
Commitment	.19	.25*	.40*
Closeness	.21*	.36*	.20
Passion	.15	.26*	-.02
Love	.10	.29*	.28*
Romance	.39*	.38*	.32*
With pos. relation. description	.14	.37*	.44*

Note. I-P = Ideal-perception; Relation. = Relationship; qual. = quality; Pos. = Positive.
* $p < .05$.

⁴ We also carried out a series of cross-lagged analyses across time on the links between ideal-perception consistency and relationship evaluations. These generally showed null results for the cross-lagged paths, both in absolute terms and in terms of comparisons across cross-lagged paths.

⁵ We also used two measures (not described in the Method section) to assess (a) attachment styles and (b) the perceived availability of alternative partners and relationships (both of which had good internal and test-retest reliability). We analyzed the correlational and cross-lagged results reported here, controlling for both of these variables. The results were unchanged.

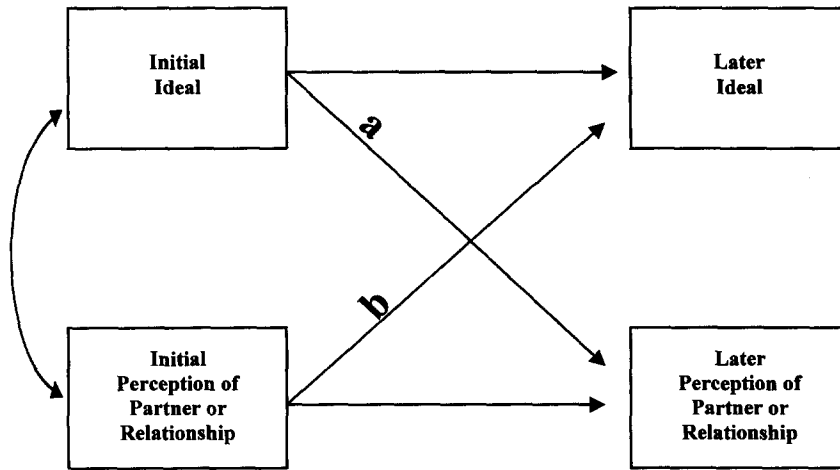


Figure 1. A model showing the cross-lagged associations between ideals and perceptions.

of .69 ($p < .001$), with 85% of participants' relationship status correctly predicted.⁶

Finally, we tested whether relationship evaluations mediated the link between ideal–perception consistency and breakup. Using either the positivity of the relationship descriptions or a summed total of the 7 PRQC scales, the mediation model was fully supported. In both cases, the prior correlation of $-.29$ ($p < .05$) between ideal–perception consistency at Month 2 and breakup at Month 3 (coded as a dummy variable in which 0 = continuing and 1 = discontinued) reduced to low and nonsignificant levels in the full model (paths of $-.09$ and $-.05$, respectively). In addition, the two remaining paths (from ideal–perception consistency to perceived relationship quality and from perceived relationship quality to breakup) were significant and in the predicted directions in both cases (paths ranging from .39 to .59).⁷

Discussion

This longitudinal study produced five major findings, all of which were expected. First, the significantly different pattern of

mean ratings for the 7 relationship quality components and the results of the confirmatory factor analysis revealed that individuals evaluate their relationships on both distinct evaluative components and on a global positivity dimension. Second, greater ideal–perception consistency was associated with greater perceived quality of the partner and the relationship, a result that replicated across two different dependent variables. Third, more positive perceptions of the partner and relationship on certain dimensions at earlier points in time predicted more importance being given to those ideal dimensions over time but not vice versa. Fourth, perceptions of higher relationship quality predicted lower rates of relationship dissolution across the first 3 months of dating relationships. Fifth, higher ideal–perception consistency predicted lower breakup rates, and this effect was mediated through having more positive relationship evaluations.

The finding that higher ideal–perception consistency was generally associated with more positive perceived quality of the relationship supports the notion that individuals make cognitive comparisons between their ideals and current perceptions in order to evaluate their relationships (see Fletcher & Simpson, in press; Simpson et al., 2000). However, the degree to which ideal standards and ideal–perception discrepancies are accessible is likely to depend on the developmental stage of relationships. Both the frequency and importance of ideal–perception comparisons should decline as relationships (and associated partner and relationship models) become more stable and more closely tied to the self-concept (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2000). When conflicts erupt and relationships—even well-established ones—sail into stormy waters, however, ideal–perception comparisons should once again become more accessible and reas-

Table 5
Cross-Lagged Paths from Analyses With Ideal Partner–Relationship Ratings and Current Partner–Relationship Perceptions

Paths	M1–M2 (n = 78)	M2–M3 (n = 54)	M1–M3 (n = 54)
From ideal to current partner–relationship perceptions (Path A)			
Warmth/Loyalty	-.02	.15	.03
Vitality/Passion	-.03	.09	.07
Status/Resources	.07	.11	.11
From current to ideal partner–relationship ratings (Path B)			
Warmth/Loyalty	.24**	-.05	.11
Vitality/Passion	.23**	.30*	.32*
Status/Resources	.07	.08	.06

Note. Paths A and B refer to paths in Figure 1. M = Month.
* Path coefficients are significantly higher than the equivalent cross-lagged path (Path A or Path B).
* $p < .05$.

⁶ Discriminant function analyses were also conducted with the same set of predictors at Month 1, 2, and 3, predicting breakup at Month 12. None of the variables, either together or singly, significantly predicted breakup.

⁷ The model fits were also excellent for all mediation measures (CFIs = 1.0; χ^2 s < 1.0; $ps > .35$). The full results of these analyses are available from Garth J. O. Fletcher.

Table 6
Means of Variables at Months 1 and 2, Comparing Individuals in Continuing Versus Discontinuing Relationships at Month 3

Variables	Month 1		Month 2	
	Relat. cont. (n = 54)	Relat. ended (n = 46)	Relat. cont. (n = 54)	Relat. ended (n = 24)
Ideal-perception consistency	0.61	0.57	0.82	0.51*
Positivity relationship description	5.00	4.43*	4.89	3.39*
Trust	6.35	5.83*	6.35	5.65*
Satisfaction	6.07	5.13*	5.96	4.22*
Commitment	5.68	5.06*	5.91	4.51*
Closeness	5.72	4.89*	5.91	4.50*
Passion	5.28	4.96	5.52	4.44*
Love	5.30	4.57*	5.62	4.51*
Romance	4.85	4.44	4.67	3.77*

Note. Ideal-perception consistency scores are within-subject correlations (converted back from Fisher's z scores). The relationship quality component scores have been recalculated and presented as 7-point scales. Starred pairs of means within Month 1 and Month 2 are significantly different at $p < .05$. Relat. = Relationship; cont. = continuing.

sume a central role in guiding partner and relationship evaluations (see Simpson et al., 2000).

Cross-lagged analyses allowed us to test three models of how ideals might be related to perceptions of the current partner and relationship. The results suggested that, at least to some extent, current perceptions influenced ideal standards over time and not vice versa. This pattern of results replicates Murray et al.'s (1996) work, which studied couples in longstanding relationships. Our explanation is twofold. First, ideals contain goals that people wish to achieve, which may not be particularly realistic, and thus allow room for adjustment on the basis of experience. Second, perceptions of the current partner and relationship may be less malleable than ideals, mainly because perceptions might have more solid moorings in the social reality of the partner's behavior than do ideals.

However, the way in which ideals and perceptions interact in relationship development is likely to be complex. For example, there is evidence that people who have positive ideals and perceptions of their partners and relationships tend to produce positive shifts in their partner's self-perceptions over time (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Murray et al., 1996). Similarly, Campbell et al. (in press) found that higher self-ideal-perception consistency was associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction for the dating partner (controlling for self-satisfaction and self-ideal-perception discrepancy). Clearly, the exploration of ideals in relation to dyad-level relationship processes is an important avenue for future research.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Simpson, 1987), greater perceived relationship quality predicted lower rates of relationship dissolution at 3 months. Higher ideal-perception consistency also significantly predicted less relationship dissolution, although only for ideal-perception consistency assessed at the 2-month phase. Moreover, as expected, mediation analyses revealed that ideal-perception consistency influenced breakup rates by means of its link with

judgments of relationship quality. Specifically, individuals who reported greater ideal-perception consistency perceived that they had higher quality relationships, which in turn predicted lower rates of dissolution. These findings are important because they pinpoint some plausible proximal psychological and relational processes through which ideal-perception consistency may impact on relationship dissolution.

The finding that relationship quality at Month 3 did not significantly predict relationship dissolution 9 months later is not entirely consistent with some other studies which have found that love, commitment, and satisfaction usually predict relationship dissolution over time periods of up to 12 months (e.g., Lund, 1985; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Van Lange et al., 1997). These studies, however, have tracked dating couples involved in fairly stable, long-term relationships (e.g., couples who have been dating 13–24 months, on average). Our findings suggest that, in the more tumultuous and uncertain world of early dating relationships, assessments of relationship quality predict relationship dissolution over relatively short periods of time.⁸

Our results also reveal that self-report measures designed to assess distinct evaluative domains (e.g., commitment, satisfaction, love, etc.) do, in fact, tap into distinct (albeit correlated) mental constructs rather than a single, monolithic, global evaluative construct as has been argued by some (see, e.g., Gottman, 1990). Confirmatory factor analyses of the PRQC scales, both in this study and in Fletcher et al.'s (2000) study, have confirmed that participants do not simply rate the different relationship quality categories as if they represent a single, global positivity dimension. Furthermore, systematic differences were found in the present study involving the mean levels of the 7 PRQC components across the 3-month rating period. Specifically, Trust consistently received the highest rating at each testing phase, whereas Romance received the lowest. Rather than slowly building from relatively low levels (see Holmes & Rempel, 1989), these results imply that fairly high levels of trust may be a prerequisite for first dates to even occur. However, trust in the early stages of relationship development may be more fragile, more centered on predictability and dependability (rather than on faith), easier to dislodge, and more exchange-oriented than trust that characterizes later stages of relationship development.

In summary, these findings confirm several central tenets of the ideal standards model (Fletcher & Simpson, in press; Simpson et al., 2000). They also support the sometimes expressed, though rarely tested, view that the early stages of relationship development ought to have an enduring impact on the developmental course of most close relationships. Investigating the early stages of relationship development may provide a valuable window into the complex interplay between knowledge structures, cognitive processes, and behavior in close relationships.

⁸ Not surprisingly, relationship dissolution in this study was more common than in the longitudinal dating studies just cited. In our sample, 46% of the participants had broken up with their partner within 2 months of the first testing phase. In the studies cited, the break-up rates ranged from 6% to 12%, on average, over each 2-month period.

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