

Accuracy and Bias of Judgments in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss recent research dealing with bias and accuracy of judgments in romantic relationships. First, two components of overall accuracy—directional bias and tracking accuracy—are outlined. Second, a model is described dealing with the causes and consequences of bias and accuracy in partner and relationship judgments, and research is reviewed showing that partners generally exhibit both positive bias and good levels of tracking accuracy. The roles played by various moderating variables (e.g., relationship stage, individual differences) are also discussed. I conclude that bias in relationship judgments is largely functional and that interactions between partners both shape and are shaped by the directional bias and tracking accuracy attendant in relationship and partner judgments.

Keywords

romantic relationships, accuracy, bias

Social psychologists have been studying the bias and accuracy of judgments in romantic relationships for about 50 years and have done so especially intensively over the past 20 years. This work has solved some perennial puzzles and increased our understanding of social cognition in relationships. It also has important implications for the wider study of motivated cognition and rationality in lay social cognition, given that the motivating forces stacked up on both sides of the ledger—for positive bias and accuracy, respectively—appear to be especially strong in romantic relationships as a consequence of their pivotal status in people's lives. In this article, I will describe some major themes that have emerged from this work.

Solving the Paradox of Romantic Love

Romantic love is often characterized as being powered by illusions and wishful thinking. This thesis is certainly theoretically plausible. From an evolutionary standpoint, romantic love can be viewed as a commitment device designed to produce substantial investment by both mates in each other and in subsequent offspring (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). The leap of faith required for long-term romantic commitments is thus based on strong attachment emotions, which in turn motivate charitable and inaccurate judgments of partners and relationships.

On the other hand, evolutionary psychology rests on the Darwinian assumption that mate-selection criteria in any species evolved according to natural and sexual selection. The force of sexual selection to produce the dazzling tail of the peacock relies on the ability of the peahen to accurately perceive the male's tail. Likewise, human judgments of physical attractiveness, status, and kindness in romantic partners must be reasonably accurate; otherwise, the associated characteristics could not have evolved. Thus, evolutionary arguments imply that when people are in the throes of romantic love, their partner and relationship judgments should be both accurate and inaccurate.

Solving this paradox has both conceptual and empirical components. The accuracy of judgments can be split into two categories: *directional bias* and *tracking accuracy*. Directional biases can be defined as differences in mean levels across a sample in a given judgment compared with a benchmark rating. Tracking accuracy is defined as the association (often a correlation) between a given judgment and a relevant benchmark. As can be seen in Figure 1, which depicts four (hypothetical) men's judgments of their

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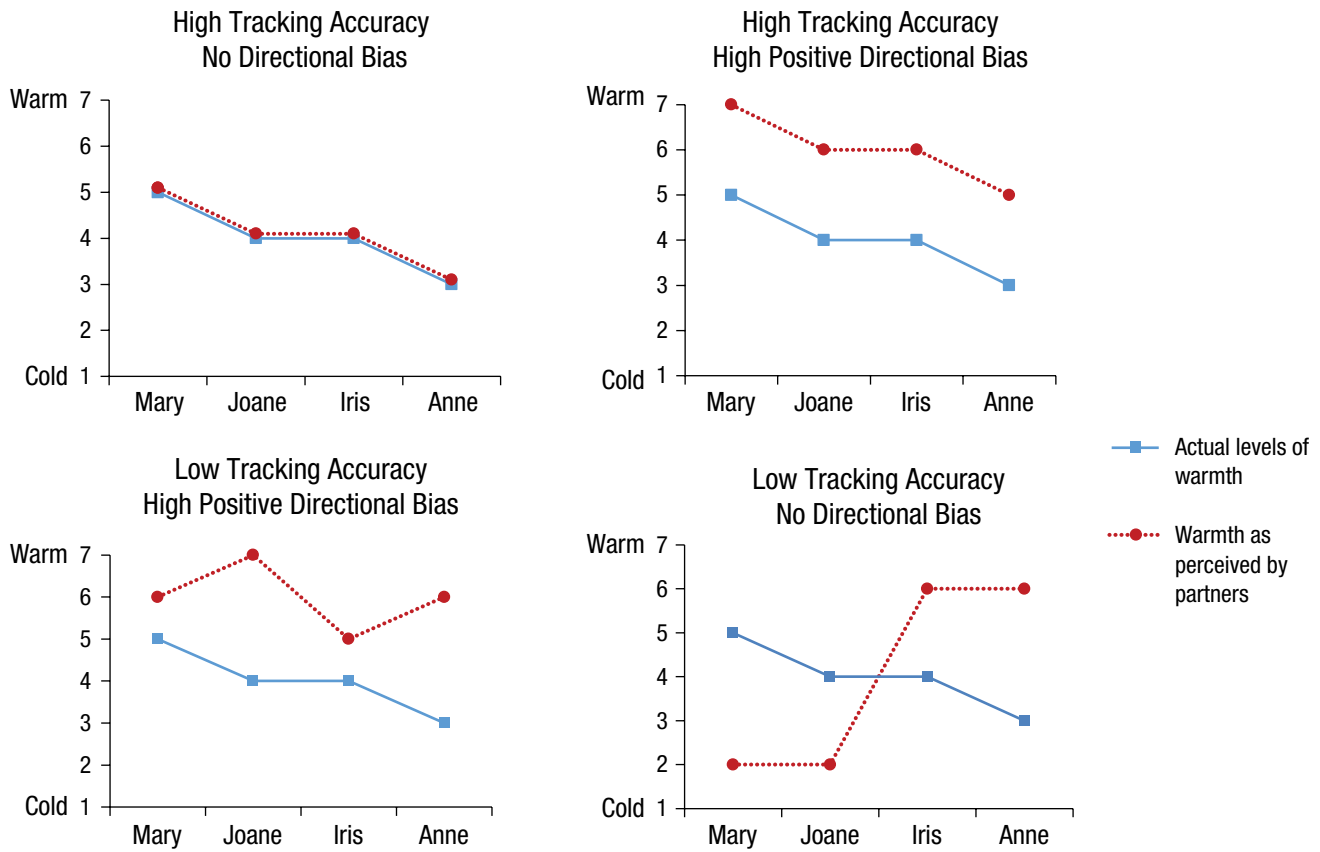


Fig. 1. Four hypothetical sets of judgments and benchmark ratings showing the independence of directional bias and tracking accuracy. For high tracking accuracy, the judgments and benchmarks correlate perfectly ($r = 1.0$), and for high positive directional bias, the judgments are two units higher, on average, than the benchmarks. Adapted from *The Science of Intimate Relationships* (p. 189), by G. J. O. Fletcher, J. A. Simpson, L. Campbell, and N. C. Overall, 2013, New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell. Copyright 2013 by Wiley-Blackwell. Adapted with permission.

partner's warmth as compared with their partner's actual warmth, directional bias and tracking accuracy are independent features. In this figure, the benchmark ratings are assumed to be perfect measures of reality. The most accurate set of judgments overall is represented in the top left panel, with direct hits by the men showing no directional bias and perfect tracking accuracy. The other three panels show examples illustrating how the absence of directional bias can also co-occur with low tracking accuracy (bottom right panel) and strong positive bias can happily co-exist with high tracking accuracy (top right panel) or low tracking accuracy (bottom left panel).

Thus, directional bias is distinct from tracking accuracy. But are they empirically independent, and how biased and accurate are judgments in romantic relationships? To answer these questions, Fletcher and Kerr (2010) reviewed the published research reporting directional bias and/or tracking accuracy in romantic relationships. They categorized the judgments into six kinds, as can be seen in Figure 2. Only studies that used objective benchmark criteria (including self-perceptions of the target, future events, and behavioral ratings by coders) were included. The results

showed that across 98 studies and 27,064 participants, tracking accuracy was reliable and substantial (mean effect size: $r = .47$; see Fig. 2). The overall amount of positive directional bias was lower but was also reliable across 48 studies and 9,393 participants (mean effect size: $r = .09$). In summary, these results show that people are remarkably accurate in making all kinds of relationship judgments, but that wearing rose-tinted glasses is commonplace in romantic relationships.

Thirty-eight of the studies in the meta-analysis reported findings for both directional bias and tracking accuracy, allowing the two effect sizes to be correlated across studies. The effect sizes were in fact unrelated ($r = .00$), showing that the two kinds of judgmental accuracy are empirically independent. To illustrate a common pattern, a study by Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, and Loewenstein (2008) found that individuals experienced significantly less distress than they had predicted concerning the relationship breakup (effect size: $r = .66$), an example of the so-called affective forecasting error. However, participants also attained good tracking accuracy for their emotional reactions ($r = .44$). Moreover, the affective forecasting

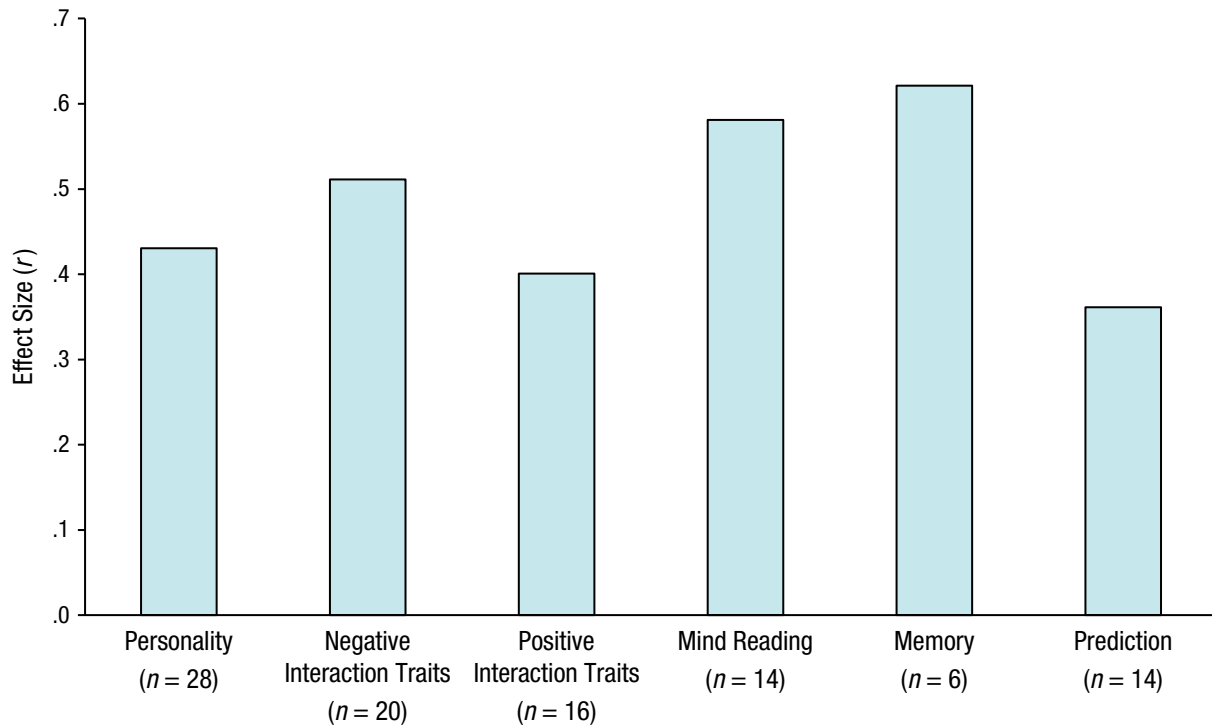


Fig. 2. Results from a meta-analysis of tracking accuracy in romantic relationships (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). The *ns* indicate the number of studies for each category of judgment.

error (directional bias) was apparent only among those who were significantly invested in the relationship (e.g., were strongly in love, did not initiate the breakup). Thus, this particular bias has a functional basis, given that it should motivate highly invested individuals, who have much at stake, to maintain their romantic relationships (albeit fruitlessly, in these cases).

Causes and Consequences of Accuracy and Bias in Relationship Judgments

Figure 3 postulates that relationship-level goals influence two crucial outcomes: the evaluation of partners or relationships, and important relationship decisions (e.g., do I stay or do I go?). However, as suggested in Figure 3, which goals are primed should be a function of various moderating variables.

Consider the links between directional bias and relationship quality. The meta-analysis by Fletcher and Kerr (2010) across a subset of 14 studies showed that more positive directional bias was associated with higher levels of relationship quality ($r = .36$). For example, those who are happier in their relationships see their partners as more attractive or trustworthy than they see themselves. Moreover, longitudinal research by Murray and her colleagues has shown that more positive directional bias predicts actual improvements in individuals' satisfaction

over time (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002) and improves the self-esteem of their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Simply being in a happy romantic relationship seems to automatically generate a positive directional bias, which in turn maintains and builds relationship satisfaction. This interpretation is consistent with an evolutionary account of romantic love as a device to encourage long-term bonding in mates (Fletcher et al., 2015). The flip side is that when problems rear their head and relationship satisfaction wanes, positive directional bias turns into negative directional bias. Indeed, high negative directional bias is one of the strongest documented predictors of relationship dissolution (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010).

The power of positive thinking, however, has its limitations. Maintaining a sunny set of partner and relationship judgments works well when relationship problems are mild and both partners are socially skilled and committed. However, when relationships are in trouble, people seem to do better over time when a more negative and realistic stance is adopted (McNulty & Karney, 2004; McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008).

In stark contrast to the findings for directional bias, the meta-analysis by Fletcher and Kerr (2010) showed that the link between tracking accuracy and relationship quality across 27 studies was close to zero ($r = .03$), in spite of many predictions to the contrary in these studies. However,

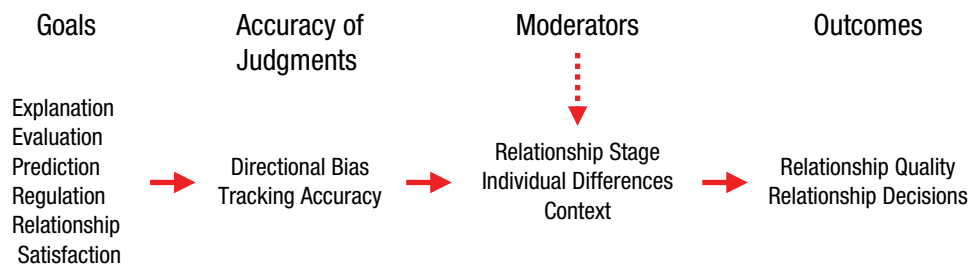


Fig. 3. The influences of relationship-level goals on evaluations of partners/relationships and relationship-related decision making. Adapted from *The Science of Intimate Relationships* (p. 193), by G. J. O. Fletcher, J. A. Simpson, L. Campbell, and N. C. Overall, 2013, New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell. Copyright 2013 by Wiley-Blackwell. Adapted with permission.

as shall be seen, research has shown that, under certain conditions, tracking accuracy is linked to relationship satisfaction and outcomes (although not always positively!).

Relationship Stage

Research examining the tracking accuracy of judgments by strangers in nonromantic settings has shown that readily observable “surface” traits, such as extraversion and physical attractiveness, are the most accurately assessed traits (Beer & Watson, 2008; Marcus & Miller, 2003). In contrast, more nuanced internal personality traits, such as ambitiousness and kindness, are not accurately perceived in first impressions. The first study to examine accuracy in the early stages of mate selection among paired strangers replicated these findings, using observer ratings of the couples having short interactions as the benchmark (Fletcher, Kerr, Li, & Valentine, 2014). Moreover, this study showed that both men and women (rationally) relied on their accurate judgments of attractiveness and vitality when making decisions about future contact, and not on their inaccurate assessments of warmth, trustworthiness, or ambition.

The analysis of bias in the same study (Fletcher et al., 2014) found that men exaggerated the romantic interest shown by their female partners and women underplayed the romantic interest of their male partners (see Fig. 4). These findings can be explained by error-management theory, which posits that biased perceptions are typically functional and often differentiated according to sex in romantic relationships (Haselton & Galperin, 2013). Consistent with men having a stronger orientation toward short-term mating than women, in early mate-selection contexts, men seem unwilling to let the chance of a romantic liaison slip by, whereas women are more cautiously focused on the risks of maintaining contact with a man who is feigning romantic interest or commitment. Overall, the findings from Fletcher et al. (2014) suggest that judgments in early mate-selection contexts are rational and functional.

Certain stages of the relationship are likely to prime the need for more accurate predictions of the future of the relationship. Fletcher and Thomas (1996) originally proposed that the goals of producing realistic (minimal positive bias) and accurate (good tracking accuracy) predictions and evaluations concerning the relationship might be salient when important decisions regarding changes in commitment are being made (e.g., deciding to break up or move in together). Commitment in such cases should be weakened as a motivational force producing positive bias, since the amount of investment is precisely what is up for grabs. In contrast, once important decisions have been made concerning boosts in relationship investment (both emotionally and practically), the costs of reversing the decision may (quite rationally) loom large. In this post-decisional stage, the goal of maintaining relationship satisfaction should again dominate, leading to positively biased processing taking center stage.

Testing these ideas, Gagné and Lydon (2001) found that individuals who were thinking in an even-handed, pre-decisional fashion (e.g., considering the pros and cons of moving in with their partner) were quite accurate in predicting the long-term demise of their relationship ($r = .67$). In contrast, those who were pushed away from the goals of prediction and truth-seeking by virtue of being in a post-decisional mental set (e.g., thinking about persuading their partner to move in with them) were not particularly accurate in their predictions ($r = .19$). Thus, in terms of the model in Figure 3, the demands of the social context have the capacity to push people toward or away from goals such as prediction or attaining the truth, which may then influence tracking accuracy.

Individual Differences and Context

Possessing low self-esteem seems to limit the operation of positive directional bias in intimate relationships. For example, Murray and her colleagues have shown that lower self-esteem is associated with more negative directional bias (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Some diary studies by

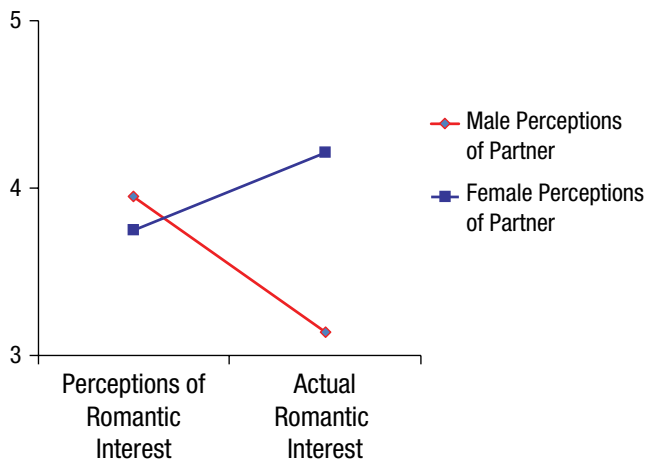


Fig. 4. Results from Fletcher, Kerr, Li, and Valentine (2014) showing the extent of heterosexual men's and women's bias in perceiving romantic interest from an opposite-sex stranger after a 10-minute interaction. Romantic interest was rated on a 7-point scale. Adapted from "Predicting Romantic Interest and Decisions in the Very Early Stages of Mate Selection: Standards, Accuracy, and Sex Differences," by G. J. O Fletcher, P. S. G. Kerr, N. P. Li, and K. A. Valentine, 2014, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, p. 546. Copyright 2014 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Adapted with permission.

Murray and others have also documented the dynamic nature of these processes over short periods of time (typically 3 weeks) in romantic relationships (Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003, 2006). These studies suggest that when the partner is perceived (rightly or wrongly) as being insensitive or transgressing, low self-esteem motivates withdrawal from the relationship, the production of uncharitable attributions, and a slide in relationship satisfaction.

These results suggest that contextual stressors, such as bad behavior by one's partner, interact with self-esteem to differentially prime the goals of evaluation and avoidance, which, in turn, produce more negative directional bias. Crucially, the same studies have shown evidence of self-fulfilling prophecy effects, whereby the partners of individuals with low self-esteem also become disillusioned over time. I say "crucially" because these results could be obtained only if the partners of the low-self-esteem folks were (to some extent) accurately tracking behavior reflecting the dissatisfaction of the low-self-esteem others. In another example, Collins and Feeney (2004) used an experimental paradigm in which they manipulated messages of support by romantic partners prior to participants performing a stressful task (preparing and giving a speech that would purportedly be videotaped and rated). Even when controlling for the actual quality of the support given, more anxiously attached adults were more biased toward perceiving their partners as less helpful and well-intentioned

Simpson and colleagues designed a methodology in which heterosexual individuals mind read the thoughts

and feelings of their partners while observing them rate the desirability of attractive opposite-sex individuals from a local dating pool (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). The researchers found that those who were in closer and more intimate relationships were motivated to produce more *inaccurate* judgments. However, more anxiously attached individuals were more accurate in their mind readings, were correspondingly more distressed by the experience, and suffered a greater loss of confidence in their relationships.

Recent research by Overall, Fletcher, and Kenny (2012) investigated this phenomenon further by exploiting a recent novel model by West and Kenny (2011) that allows directional bias and tracking accuracy to be simultaneously assessed. In this research, couples in relationships discussed ways in which one partner wanted the other to change (an inherently threatening context). In later reviews of the recorded discussions, participants made multiple judgments of their partner's regard for them and also their own regard for their partner (e.g., how much they felt close and understood). Using the actual perceptions of regard by the partner as the benchmark, this study found that tracking accuracy across the discussions increased as negative bias became more marked. Moreover, women (but not men) who were more insecure about their partners' regard were especially prone to this pattern, perceiving their partners as more negative than they were in reality. In contrast, when more secure women were judging negative appraisals from their partners, they charitably maintained a positive directional bias.

Taken together, these studies suggest that relationship stress (a contextual moderating variable) interacts with working models of attachment to differentially prime evaluation goals and the need to protect the self. Specifically for individuals with insecure working models, stress increases monitoring and engages cognitive resources, while simultaneously decreasing positive directional bias but improving tracking accuracy.

Conclusions

Social psychologists have often commented on the flawed and biased nature of lay social judgments. Yet the current analysis of the extensive research and theorizing on judgments in romantic relationships shows that they are typically quite accurate. Yes, such judgments are often biased (either positively or negatively), but such biases serve functional purposes rather than simply being the products of hopelessly flawed or Pollyannaish thinking. More generally, this line of work reveals how the interactive dance of romantic relationships both shapes and is shaped by the directional bias and tracking accuracy attendant in partner and relationship judgments.

Recommended Reading

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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