Two studies demonstrated the causal role of relationship theories in influencing relationship satisfaction and the processes affecting satisfaction. In both studies, participants were induced to hold either the soulmate or work-it-out theory. Feelings that one’s partner was ideal (or not) were associated with relationship satisfaction more strongly for people induced to hold the soulmate theory than the work-it-out theory (Study 1). In Study 2, participants’ beliefs about their relationships were threatened, and strategies for responding to this threat were assessed. Inducing people to hold the soulmate theory resulted in more relationship-enhancing cognitions if participants believed they were with the right person but more relationship-deterring cognitions if participants did not believe they were with the right person. These polarizing tendencies were enhanced under threat. In contrast, inducing people to hold a work-it-out theory produced almost no biased processing, leading people to process information similarly, regardless of their feelings about their partner.

Keywords: romantic relationships; implicit theories; relationship satisfaction; relationship beliefs; relationship threats

Before people even enter a romantic relationship, they have ideas about romantic relationships that guide their actions in that relationship. Shaped by culture, their parents, peers, or personal experience, people may have expectations about their relationship partner as well as the relationship itself; the fulfillment of these general expectations may play a key role in relationship success. At various times in the relationship, people to differing degrees may believe that there is one perfect person for them and that the key to a successful relationship is finding that person. At other times, they may believe that finding the right person is less important than working to maintain the relationship. These different beliefs may lead people to behave in very different ways in their romantic relationships, particularly at times when their beliefs about their partner are threatened. The purpose of the present research was to investigate how these beliefs influence the way people think about their partners’ strengths and faults and contribute to the satisfaction they ultimately derive from their relationships.

Recent research has revealed striking differences among people in their theories of romantic relationships (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001; Ruvolo & Rotondo, 1998). The theories people hold about romantic relationships are associated with their satisfaction with their relationships as well as the longevity of the relationships (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2001). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether these beliefs actually play a causal role. Moreover, if indeed the theories do play a causal role, little is known about the processes by which they do so. Thus, the cen-
nal goals of this research were twofold. First, the causal connection between relationship theories and relationship satisfaction was investigated (Study 1). Second, the specific cognitive strategies that people who hold different theories use—to either keep themselves in or get themselves out of their relationships—were investigated (Study 2).

**Folk Theories of Relationships**

Substantial research indicates that people hold theories about themselves and the world that guide the way they think, feel, and act (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988, for a review). Dweck and Leggett (1988) distinguish between people who believe that their personal attributes are fixed and unchanging (entity theory) and people who believe that these attributes are malleable and can be developed during the life course (incremental theory). These theories have generally been examined in relation to achievement, but recent research has explored the role of these theories in other domains such as stereotyping and moral judgment (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). It further appears that people also may have similar theories about their romantic relationships that prove consequential.

Investigators have recently begun to distinguish an entity-type theory of romantic relationships from an incremental-type theory (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Ruvolo & Rotondo, 1998). Knee (1998), for example, differentiated between the extent to which people believed that their partner was immediately compatible (an entity theory) and the extent to which people believed that relationships could change over time (an incremental theory); he labeled these two views a destiny theory and a growth theory, respectively. In a separate line of research, Franiuk and colleagues (2002) elaborated on this conceptualization. These investigators distinguished between two theories of romantic relationships—a “soulmate” theory and a work-it-out theory—loosely based on Dweck and colleagues’ entity and incremental theories, respectively. Similar to the entity versus incremental and growth versus destiny theories, the soulmate versus work-it-out theories relate to people’s beliefs about the role of effort in relationship success. However, the soulmate and work-it-out theories also encompass beliefs about the importance of passion (high for soulmate theory), the idealization of one’s partner (high for soulmate theory), and the scarcity principle in which there are either very few (soulmate theory) or very many (work-it-out theory) potential partners with whom one can have a successful relationship. (For a more elaborate description of how soulmate and work-it-out theories differ empirically and conceptually from entity vs. incremental and destiny vs. growth theories, see Franiuk et al., 2002.)

The theories that people hold about their romantic relationships may affect a number of aspects of their relationships that are vital to their success—from choosing a romantic partner to guiding strategies for maintaining relationship satisfaction to deciding to terminate a relationship. A cursory analysis might lead one to think in terms of main effects. One might hypothesize that the soulmate theory is more beneficial because it leads to idealization or positive illusions that can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Or, one might hypothesize that the work-it-out theory is more beneficial because it will lead to realism and proactive coping, whereas the soulmate theory will lead to disillusionment or passive fatalism in the face of difficulty. However, recent research has suggested that the effect of relationship theories more often operates through interactions rather than main effects. Specifically, research has suggested that there is an extremely important interaction between one’s general theory of relationships and beliefs about one’s specific partner. In terms of entity versus incremental theories, Ruvolo and Rotondo (1998) found that theories interacted with positive views of one’s partner to predict relationship well-being, such that entity theorists were more satisfied in their relationships than were incremental theorists when they held positive views of their partners. Knee (1998) found that those who were high (rather than low) on destiny beliefs were more likely to end their relationships, if they were not initially satisfied. Franiuk and colleagues (2002) found that an interaction between one’s relationship theory and beliefs about the fit of his or her partner predicted both relationship satisfaction and longevity. For soulmate theorists, believing that one’s partner was the right match for them was crucial for both their satisfaction in the relationship and their staying in it. Soulmate theorists with positive beliefs about their partners were most satisfied and most likely to remain with their partners; soulmate theorists with negative beliefs were the least likely to. For work-it-out theorists, beliefs about one’s partner were much less important in affecting satisfaction and longevity. The outcomes for work-it-out theorists with positive beliefs about their partners and those with negative beliefs about their partners were not nearly as extreme, compared to their soulmate-theorist counterparts.

**The Person and the Situation, Chronic and Temporary Accessibility**

There are reasonably stable individual differences in the degree to which people endorse the soulmate or work-it-out theories. (On Franiuk et al.’s [2002] Relationship Theory measure, respondents’ beliefs at Time 1 were correlated .74 with their beliefs 8 months later.) Thus, it makes sense to talk about a person-level variable, that is, about soulmate theorists and work-it-out theo-
rists. However, despite this relatively high stability, it remains to be seen how pliable these differences are and how much this person variable can change in response to situations. Mainstream American culture supports both soulmate and work-it-out theories, and thus, it should not be surprising if a person endorses both the soulmate and the work-it-out theory at one time or another in his or her relationship. Recent research has shown that we hold a variety of (often contradictory) theories about the world, and situations or primes can cause different theories to become active (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001). Thus, relationship theories—similar to other types of schemas, beliefs, or interpretive filters—can be seen both as chronically accessible person-level constructs and temporarily accessible situation-level constructs.

The importance of these theories as person-level constructs is that these constructs become “default” theories (i.e., the one that a person is predisposed to activate, all other things being equal). However, researchers have shown that whereas it is important to know what is chronically accessible to predict what will happen “on average,” it is often temporary accessibility that determines what will happen in any given situation. Social cognition work on the important role of priming bears this out (e.g., Hong & Chiu, 2001).

Although research to date has focused on person-level chronically accessible relationship theories, little work has focused on the way temporary accessibility of the theories can affect people’s emotions and thoughts in a given situation. The present article addresses this issue by manipulating through primes which relationship theory people hold. Thus, the studies (a) give us a snapshot of how soulmate theories and work-it-out theories influence relationship affect and cognition in the moment and (b) allow us to make strong causal claims about the role of these theories. Longitudinal data suggest that the soulmate theory leads people who are with their ideal partner to be satisfied in their relationship while it leads those not with their ideal partner to be unsatisfied (Franiuk et al., 2002). However, this longitudinal research is still correlational. Controlled experiments have yet to be conducted, and thus, an important aim of the current research was to investigate via experimental manipulation the causal role of the soulmate and work-it-out theories in influencing people’s relationship satisfaction (Study 1) and guiding the cognitive strategies they use in thinking about their relationships (Study 2).

Through priming relationship theories, we hope to show that inducing people to hold a soulmate theory leads those who believe they are with the right person to show positive biases in thinking about their relationships, whereas it leads those who do not believe they are with the right person to show negative biases. In contrast, inducing people to hold a work-it-out theory should lead people to be far less sensitive to whether their partner is right for them, causing this variable to be less relevant and less likely to cause biases either way in thinking about the relationship.

Thinking About the Relationship: Relationship Theories, Cognitive Strategies, and Negative Information

A wealth of research has shown that people use a variety of tactics (that may or may not reflect reality) to foster commitment and intimacy in their relationships. For example, people downplay the attractiveness of dating alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), bolster their relationships in comparison to those of others (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995), and label their partners’ faults as unstable characteristics related to the situation (Holzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Similarly, people looking to get out of a relationship may use other cognitive strategies to facilitate their exit. That is, they may play up their partner’s dissimilarities or latch on to or magnify their partner’s flaws, thus making their exit easier and more rapid. In the current research, we assessed people’s beliefs about their specific partner, then manipulated people’s relationship theory to examine the effect on people’s relationship satisfaction, perceptions of their partner’s similarities, and assessment of their partner’s virtues and faults.

Given the importance of similarity and the need to be with the right person for soulmate theorists, an important indicator of whether a relationship is worth continuing may be the perception of one’s partner as similar to oneself (e.g., Byrne, 1997). To one endorsing a soulmate theory, perceived agreement with one’s partner may offer valuable information about whether that partner is the “right” person (Franiuk et al., 2002). Thus, those endorsing a soulmate theory may distort their perceptions of their partner’s position on various topics, depending on whether they believe their partner is the right one for them. They may positively distort perceptions if convinced they are with the right person and negatively distort perceptions if convinced they are not with the right person.

Cognitive strategies are most likely to be invoked in the face of threat. In Study 2, we examined how threat affects people’s thinking about their relationship after they are induced to hold either a soulmate or work-it-out theory. Cognitive distortions about their partners may be quite useful to soulmate theorists who are looking to either enhance their relationships (if with the right person) or exit their relationships (if not with the right person). Threat conditions may serve to magnify these tendencies. For soulmate theorists with the right person,
thrust only increases the need to positively distort and defend one’s relationship, but it may just add fuel to the fire if one is looking for confirmation that the relationship is ultimately doomed to fail. For work-it-out theorists, these polarizing distortions about a partner should not occur under either threat or no threat conditions. The aim of Study 2 was to investigate how relationship theories causally influence some of the specific strategies that people use to enhance or detract from their relationship, particularly when faced with relationship-threatening information.

STUDY 1

Previous longitudinal work predicting relationship satisfaction and longevity has shown that there is an important interaction between people’s general soulmate or work-it-out theory of relationships and their beliefs about their specific partner. The first study was designed to address the issue of causation by manipulating people’s relationship theories. Participants were induced to hold either a soulmate theory or a work-it-out theory. In Study 1, we employed a technique used in past research to manipulate people’s theories of personality and intelligence by giving them a bogus magazine article in favor of an entity or incremental theory (Bergen, 1991; Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). Using this technique, previous research has shown that once participants are presented with a convincing argument for one theory, they tend to act in line with those beliefs.

Participants reading an article supporting the soulmate theory were expected to report more satisfaction with their relationships and greater similarity between themselves and their partners if they believed that their partners were ideal matches (as compared to if they did not believe so). Participants reading an article supporting the work-it-out theory were not expected to be as strongly influenced by their beliefs about their partners (as being the right people). In this study and in Study 2, it is important to note that these beliefs about their partners were measured approximately 3 weeks earlier in a very different setting with no apparent connection to the present study.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 76 students (34 men, 42 women), involved in a romantic relationship, from the introductory psychology participant pool at the University of Illinois. The mean age of the sample was 19.7 years (range = 18 to 25 years), and 57% reported being in their current relationship for at least 1 year (M = 17.4 months, SD = 15.1 months).

PROCEDURE

Participants took part in two sessions. During the first session, they indicated whether they held a soulmate theory or a work-it-out theory by completing the Relationship Theories Questionnaire; they also rated the extent to which they considered their partner to be the right person for them, their relationship satisfaction, and completed a short personal information questionnaire. These questionnaires were completed in a mass-testing session along with a larger set of unrelated questionnaires to hide the connection to the second session.

During the second session, approximately 3 weeks later, participants were told that they were going to be completing a reading comprehension task. They were given either the soulmate article or the work-it-out article and an unrelated science and technology article. To reduce suspicion about the connection of the relationship article to the relationship questionnaires, participants were told that they would be reading two of six possible articles, and they were allowed to choose a number from a box to “randomly” determine each of the articles they read. After reading the relationship theory article and the unrelated article, participants were given a two-item questionnaire assessing their comprehension of each article (see Chiu et al., 1997). As part of the cover story, participants also answered a few questions about their reading habits. Finally, under the guise of a “college life survey,” participants filled out short questionnaires assessing relationship satisfaction, perceived similarity with their current partner, personality, and “college life.” The latter questions were included to maintain the cover story. All participants were fully debriefed by a trained research assistant.

THEORY MANIPULATION

The relationship theories were manipulated using bogus articles supporting either the benefits of the soulmate theory or the work-it-out theory. The article supporting the soulmate theory focused on passion, the ease with which relationship satisfaction comes if one is with the “right” person. The article suggested that these factors play a significant role in relationship satisfaction and success over time. The article supporting the work-it-out theory focused on the importance of work and effort in sustaining a long-term relationship.

Pilot testing to ensure that the manipulation actually influenced people’s theories was conducted. Participants (N= 61) were given an article endorsing the soulmate or the work-it-out theory. There was a significant effect of the manipulation on people’s theories. Participants were more likely to endorse the soulmate theory when given the soulmate article versus the work-it-out article (M= 5.21 for the soulmate article, M= 4.59 for the
work-it-out article), $t(59) = 3.63, p < .001$. Participants were more likely to endorse the work-it-out theory when given the work-it-out article versus the soulmate article ($M = 4.44$ for the work-it-out article, $M = 3.71$ for the soulmate article), $t(59) = -4.08, p < .001$.

**Measures**

**SESSION 1**

**Relationship theories.** Participants’ relationship theories were assessed using the Relationship Theories Questionnaire (RTQ; Franiuk et al., 2002). The RTQ consists of 20 Likert-type items (1 to 7 response scale, with higher numbers representing more endorsement of the soulmate or work-it-out theory). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements on the soulmate scale, such as, “It is extremely important that my spouse and I be passionately in love with each other after we are married” and “Bonds between people are usually there before you meet them.” Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements on the work-it-out scale, such as, “If people would just put in the effort, most marriages would work” and “Only over time can you really learn about your partner.” The scales were internally reliable ($\alpha = .78, M = 5.15, SD = .78$ for the 11-item soulmate scale; $\alpha = .71, M = 4.15, SD = .78$ for the 9-item work-it-out scale).

**Beliefs about partner fit.** Participants’ beliefs about their present partner as being an ideal match for them were assessed with a 7-item (1 to 7 response) measure. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with items, such as, “I can’t imagine finding a partner who is a better match for me than my current partner”; “My current partner is the ‘right’ person for me”; “I know that there are many other people in the world that are a better match for me than my current partner”; and “My partner is as close to ideal as a relationship partner as I ever expect to find.” Higher means represented greater beliefs that one’s partner is the right person ($\alpha = .96, M = 5.14, SD = 1.36$). The reliability of the scale was equally high for those who were either high or low (as determined by a median split) on the chronic soulmate or work-it-out theory scales (all $\alpha > .92$).

**Relationship quality.** Participants’ satisfaction with their relationships was assessed with the 12-item questionnaire used by Franiuk et al. (2002). Three of these questions were adapted from Norton’s (1983) Quality Marriage Index. Participants rated the extent of their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (e.g., “I am extremely happy with my relationship”). The remainder of the questions, several of which were borrowed from Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, reflected general statements about relationship satisfaction, such as, “How often do you regret that you are going out with your partner?” Three of these items were rated on a 6-point scale (1 = all of the time, 6 = never), with higher numbers representing more relationship satisfaction. Six items were rated on a 7-point scale. For example, the item, “How satisfied are you with this relationship?” was rated from 1 = not at all satisfied to 7 = very satisfied. Items were standardized and averaged, with higher numbers reflecting greater relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = .91, M = .90, SD = .73$).

**SESSION 2**

**Relationship quality.** Participants’ satisfaction with their relationships was assessed with the 12-item questionnaire as in Session 1.

**Perceived similarity.** The extent to which participants believe they hold similar views on issues with their relationship partner was assessed with 11 items from Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale. The items asked about agreement on matters ranging from such issues as spending time together and matters of affection to more global matters such as philosophy of life and religion. Participants reported their perceived agreement or disagreement with their partner for each item on a 6-point scale (1 = always disagree, 6 = always agree), with higher numbers indicating greater perceived agreement and similarity ($\alpha = .83, M = 4.71, SD = .64$).

**Results**

To address the causal direction of the association between the implicit theories and relationship satisfaction, participants were randomly assigned to the soulmate article or the work-it-out article condition. As would be expected, there were no preexisting differences between those assigned to either condition. As assessed at Time 1, participants did not differ on their endorsement of the soulmate theory or work-it-out theory, their beliefs that their partner was the right person for them, or their relationship satisfaction, all $t$s(74) < 1.

**RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION**

A hierarchical multiple regression predicting relationship satisfaction at Time 2 was conducted to investigate whether the relationship theory induction at Time 2 interacted with people’s (Time 1) beliefs about their partner. At Step 1, theory condition and beliefs about partner fit were entered. At Step 2, the product reflecting the interaction between the two was entered. All independent variable terms were standardized. As anticipated, the Induced Relationship Theory $\times$ Beliefs About Partner Fit interaction term significantly predicted relationship satisfaction at Time 2 (see Table 1), $t(75) = 2.03,$
A hierarchical multiple regression also was conducted, predicting perceived agreement on relationship issues from the relationship theory one was induced to hold and the belief about whether one was with the right person. The interaction between Induced Relationship Theory × Beliefs About Partner Fit predicted perceived agreement on relationship issues, \( t(75) = 1.83, p < .10 \). The correlation between partner fit and perceived similarity was stronger for those induced to hold the soulmate theory, \( r(38) = .53, p < .001 \), than for those induced to hold the work-it-out theory, \( r(34) = .27, \text{ ns} \).

**PERCEIVED SIMILARITY**

The preceding analyses focused on relationship theory as an experimentally manipulated variable. However, because we administered the RTQ at Time 1, we also could examine relationship theory as an individual difference variable, gauging chronic accessibility of the soulmate and work-it-out theories. First, examining only variables assessed at Time 1, the Chronic Soulmate Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction significantly predicted satisfaction at Time 1, \( t(72) = -3.39, p < .01 \), and the Chronic Work-It-Out Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction failed to predict relationship satisfaction, \( t(72) = .45, \text{ ns} \), replicating Franiuk et al. (2002) and reiterating the importance of the interaction between chronic relationship theories and partner fit for relationship satisfaction.

Second, examining variables measured at Times 1 and 2, once the prime was introduced, both the Chronic Soulmate Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction and the Chronic Work-It-Out Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction failed to predict either satisfaction or perceived similarity at Time 2 (\( p = .65 \) and .32, respectively). We also examined whether each chronic theory affected the Induced Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction described above. The three-way Chronic Theory × Induced Theory × Beliefs About Partner interactions were not significant, except for a marginally significant Chronic Soulmate Theory × Induced Theory × Beliefs About Partner Fit predicting perceived agreement, \( t(64) = -1.69, p < .10 \). The form of this interaction was such that the Chronic Soulmate Theory × Beliefs About Partner Fit interaction was only significant when participants read the work-it-out theory article at Time 2, \( t(32) = -2.20, p < .05 \), with the association between beliefs about one’s partner and perceived agreement being stronger for those low on the soulmate theory compared to those high on the soulmate theory. In sum, except for this marginally significant interaction, the effects of theory accessibility created by the experimental manipulation temporarily overrode any effects of chronic theory accessibility. Taken together, the findings demonstrate the independent effects of both the chronic and manipulated theories.

**STUDY 2**

The findings from Study 1 demonstrated that relationship theories play a causal role in relationship satisfaction. In Study 2, we examined some of the specific processes involved. What are soulmate theorists doing in
their relationships (if anything) to boost their relationship satisfaction when they believe that their partner is the right person for them? What are they doing to diminish relationship satisfaction and hasten the relationship’s end when they believe that their partner is not the right person for them? And conversely, what are work-it-out theorists doing cognitively to make their beliefs about the fit of their partner so much less important in affecting satisfaction? Up to this point, there has been no causal, experimental evidence as to how these theories exert their influence.

In Study 2, we looked at some of the cognitive strategies people use in thinking about their relationships. We examined this under threat and no threat conditions. Those induced to hold the soulmate theory (in comparison to those induced to hold the work-it-out theory) may be more likely to use cognitive distortions in thinking about their relationships under no-threat conditions, but they should be even more likely to use such distortions under threat conditions. These cognitive distortions should be positive if those induced to hold the soulmate theory believe they are with the right person and want to defend such beliefs. These distortions should be negative if those induced to hold the soulmate theory believe they are not with the right person and are perhaps looking for reasons to leave the relationship. These polarizing tendencies should be magnified in the face of threat because threat should increase soulmate theorists’ motivation to defend their partner if he or she is believed to be “Mr. or Ms. Right,” whereas threat may only add confirmatory evidence that a partner is deeply flawed when one does not believe he or she is with the right person. Those induced to hold the work-it-out theory should be more even-handed in their assessments and should be relatively unaffected by preexisting beliefs about whether their partner is a good fit for them. Furthermore, because work-it-out theorists appear to be less inclined to motivated reasoning about their partner, if they do encounter threatening information, they should evaluate it dispassionately, apply the negative information, and do so regardless of whether they previously believed their partner was right for them.

In Study 2, after participants’ theories were induced using the procedure described in Study 1, their beliefs about partner fit were threatened by giving them negative feedback about their relationship (or not), and participants were then given the chance to respond to this threat. In summary of the reasoning above, there were thus three main predictions:

1. Those induced to hold the soulmate theory should engage in more cognitive distortions, such that these distortions are positive if their partner is believed to be right for them and negative if their partner is not. However, those induced to hold the work-it-out theory should not engage in such polarizing distortions (an Induced Relationship Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction);

2. Those induced to hold the work-it-out theory (in comparison to those induced to hold the soulmate theory) should dispassionately evaluate the negative (threatening) feedback about the relationship that the experimenter provides, and they should thus take this negative information into account accordingly by lowering their assessment of the relationship (an Induced Relationship Theory × Threat Condition interaction); and

3. The Induced Relationship Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction should be magnified in the threat condition. Thus, those induced to hold the soulmate theory should engage in polarizing distortions with the direction of the distortions determined by preexisting positive or negative beliefs about partner fit (as in Hypothesis 1), and these polarizing effects should be particularly large in the threat condition. On the other hand, work-it-out theorists should dispassionately evaluate and apply the negative (threatening) feedback (as in Hypothesis 2), and they should do so regardless of preexisting beliefs about whether their partner was a good fit for them (an Induced Relationship Theory × Threat Condition × Beliefs About Partner interaction).

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 102 students (44 men, 58 women), involved in a romantic relationship, from the introductory psychology participant pool at the University of Illinois. The mean age of the sample was 20.2 years (range = 18 to 27 years). Sixty percent reported being in their current relationship for at least 1 year ($M = 16.6$ months, $SD = 15.6$ months).

PROCEDURE

As in Study 1, data were collected in two supposedly unrelated sessions. The procedure in Session 1 was the same as that in Study 1. During a mass testing session, participants indicated their relationship theories, beliefs about their partner, and relationship satisfaction embedded in a set of unrelated questionnaires to hide any connection to Session 2. During Session 2, approximately 3 weeks later, participants were brought into the lab and told that they were going to be participating in two separate studies that had been combined because they were both very short. In the “first” study, participants were told that they would be doing a reading comprehension task. At this time, they were exposed to the theory manipulation as in Study 1. In the “second” study, participants were first asked to make ratings of themselves and their romantic partner. Half of the participants were then given feedback by the experimenter about their responses (the other half were given no feedback). This feedback was threatening in that it informed participants that their current relationship had little chance of
success. All participants were then given a chance to reduce or augment this threat (by changing their ratings and by writing a narrative about their relationship). Participants were thoroughly debriefed by a trained research assistant.

**THEORY MANIPULATION**

The relationship theories were manipulated as in Study 1.

**THREAT MANIPULATION**

Participants’ beliefs were threatened by giving them false feedback about the chances for success of their relationship. Participants in both conditions (threat and no threat) were given two questionnaires—a self-rating questionnaire (Murray & Holmes, 1993) and a questionnaire about their partner. The questionnaire about the partner was low in face validity to make participants less sure as to what the “right” answers were and, therefore, to make them more likely to believe the false feedback (e.g., “My partner has a very large CD collection,” “My partner hates being around second-hand smoke”). These questionnaires were included only to maintain the cover story and were not used as actual dependent variables. Participants also were given 3 minutes to list the similarities and differences between themselves and their partners that they felt affected the success of the relationship. After completing a short filler task (to give the impression that the experimenter was analyzing the questionnaires), participants were given feedback by the experimenter about their responses. In the threat condition, the experimenter returned with a computer printout indicating that the chances of success for their relationship were very low. Participants were led to believe that their description of their current partner boded ill for the future of their relationship. They were told that the way they described themselves did not match up well with the way they described their partner and that, based on extensive data already collected, their relationship had a very low chance of succeeding. Participants were then given the chance to amend the lists they originally made and were asked to write a narrative about their partner’s role in promoting intimacy in their relationship that further gave them the chance to reduce (or exaggerate) any feelings of threat. Participants in the no threat condition were not given any feedback about their prior responses before being given a chance to change their lists and write a narrative.

**Measures**

**SESSION 1**

Participants’ relationship theories, beliefs about their partner, relationship quality, and background were all assessed as in Session 1 of Study 1. As in Study 1, all Session 1 measures were internally reliable, $\alpha = .76$, $M = 4.91$, $SD = .74$, for the soulmate scale; $\alpha = .70$, $M = 4.30$, $SD = .74$, for the work-it-out scale; $\alpha = .91$, $M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.06$, for the partner fit measure; and $\alpha = .91$, $M = .00$, $SD = .74$, for relationship satisfaction.

**SESSION 2**

The additional details and examples that the participants provided for their lists of similarities and differences were coded by two coders blind to the condition of each participant and to participants’ Session 1 scores. Following Murray and Holmes (1993), the number of unique additions the participant made to his or her similarities and differences lists were counted. Any changes to an original similarity or difference also were counted.

The participants’ narratives were coded following Murray and Holmes (1993, 1999). The narratives were divided into individual thought units; the coders then independently rated each thought unit on embellishment/refutation and valence. First, the narratives were coded for the number of positive narrative statements and negative narrative statements. Furthermore, a statement was coded as a positive distortion if it embellished or exaggerated a strength or refuted a weakness (e.g., “She’s still got problems related to her ex, so that hinders development to a certain extent, but on the other hand, she’s always making favorable comparisons, which I guess could be a good thing”).

A statement was coded as a negative distortion if it embellished or exaggerated a weakness or refuted a strength (e.g., “He has done some developing but more so it was me”).

For each narrative, a sum total of each rating category was calculated.

The two coders had 75% agreement on 20% of the sample, Cohen’s $\kappa = .89$ for the main dependent variables. One coder was randomly chosen to code the remainder of the narratives and similarities and differences lists.

**Results**

The central goal of Study 2 was to investigate the processes involved in enhancing relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction and the causal influence of the induced relationship theories on these processes. There were no preexisting differences between those assigned to the experimental conditions. As assessed at Time 1, participants did not differ on their endorsement of the soulmate theory or work-it-out theory, their beliefs that their partner was the “right person,” or their relationship satisfaction, all $F$s(98) < .35.

**COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS**

Cognitive distortions reflected the number of similarities added to a participant’s similarities list, positive nar-
rative statements, positive refutations or exaggerations, differences added to a participant’s differences list (reverse-scored by multiplying by −1), and negative narrative statements (reverse-scored by multiplying by −1).1 At Step 1, the theory condition, threat condition, and beliefs about partner terms were entered to predict cognitive distortions. At Step 2, the products reflecting the two-way interactions between the three terms were entered (as seen in Table 2). In line with Hypothesis 1, the Theory Condition × Beliefs About Partner interaction term significantly predicted distortions, $t(94) = 5.10, p < .001$. Those induced to hold a soulmate theory positively distorted their relationship cognitions if they thought they were with the right person and negatively distorted their relationship cognitions if they thought they were not with the right person. In the induced soulmate theory condition, the correlation between beliefs about partner and cognitive distortions was $r(45) = .67, p < .001$. In the induced work-it-out theory condition, the correlation between beliefs about partner and distortions was nonsignificant, $r(52) = .08$.

In line with Hypothesis 2 that those induced to hold the work-it-out theory (compared to the soulmate theory) would be differentially affected by the threatening feedback from the experimenter, the Relationship Theory × Threat Condition interaction also significantly predicted cognitive distortions, $t(94) = 2.41, p < .05$. The threat caused those induced to hold the work-it-out theory to nondefensively apply the negative information to the assessment of their relationships (M for threat condition = −.14, M for no threat condition = .21). This dispasionate evaluation of threatening information was not shown by those induced to hold a soulmate theory (M for threat condition = .05, M for no threat condition = −.1).

At Step 3, the crucial three-way interaction was entered. In line with Hypothesis 3, the Relationship Theory × Threat Condition × Beliefs About Partner interaction term significantly predicted cognitive distortions, $t(93) = 2.87, p < .01$, as seen in Table 2. Those induced to hold the soulmate theory positively distorted if they thought they were with the right person, whereas they negatively distorted if they thought they were not with the right person. The pattern was the same in the threat versus no threat conditions, but as predicted, it was more extreme under threat (threat condition $r$ between partner fit and distortions = .86 vs. no threat condition $r$ = .58, see rows 1 and 3 of Table 4). Those induced to hold the work-it-out theory, on the other hand, accepted the negative information and then dispassionately applied it to both partners who they thought were or were not a good fit. As may be seen in rows 2 and 4 of Table 4, there was no significant relationship between belief about partner fit and the distortion variable for those induced to hold the work-it-out theory ($r = .44$ and 0, ns).

### Table 2: Study 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Relationship Theory, Threat Condition, and Partner Fit Predicting Relationship-Enhancing Distortions Minus Relationship-Detracting Distortions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner fit</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.38****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat condition</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner fit</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.48****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat condition</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Theory</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Threat</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory × Threat</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner fit</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat condition</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Theory</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Threat</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory × Threat</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Theory × Threat</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: $R^2 = .14$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .23, F(3, 92) = 11.2, p < .001$, for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .05, F(1, 88) = 7.50, p < .01$, for Step 3. Partner fit = beliefs about partner fit, theory condition = theory participant induced to hold, Fit × Theory = the product of beliefs about partner fit and relationship theory, Fit × Threat = the product of beliefs about partner fit and threat condition, Fit × Theory × Threat = the product of partner fit, relationship theory, and threat condition. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

**Threat condition.** To decompose the three-way interaction, we examined the Relationship Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction in the threat and no threat conditions separately. As anticipated, among participants in the threat condition, the interaction term significantly predicted distortions, $t(51) = 6.27, p < .001$ (see Table 3). The correlation between one’s beliefs about one’s partner and distortions was stronger for those induced to hold a soulmate theory, $r(24) = .86, p < .001$, than for those induced to hold a work-it-out theory, $r(27) = .14$, ns (Table 4).

**No threat condition.** In the no threat condition, there was a marginal Relationship Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction predicting cognitive distortions, $t(42) = 1.88, p < .10$. The correlation between one’s beliefs about one’s partner and distortions was .58 ($p < .001$) for those induced to hold a soulmate theory, whereas there was no correlation ($r = 0$) between beliefs about partner and
distortions for those induced to hold a work-it-out theory (see Table 4).

**PREEXISTING (CHRONIC) THEORIES**

The preceding analyses have focused on induced relationship theory as an experimentally manipulated variable. However, because we administered the RTQ at Time 1, we could also examine relationship theory as an individual difference variable reflecting the chronic accessibility of the theories. Examining only variables assessed at Time 1, the Chronic Soulmate Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction marginally predicted satisfaction at Time 1, \( t(97) = -1.64, p = .10 \), and the Chronic Work-It-Out Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction significantly predicted relationship satisfaction, \( t(97) = 3.42, p < .01 \), replicating past research showing the importance of chronic theories (Franiuk et al., 2002).

However, in predicting cognitive distortions at Time 2, neither the chronic soulmate theory nor the chronic work-it-out theory had much of an effect. There were almost no interactions of either chronic theory variable with the other variables shown in Table 2 (Step 3). None of the six possible two-way interactions involving either the chronic soulmate theory or the chronic work-it-out theory were significant. Only one of the six possible three-way interactions was significant. (In this three-way interaction, those induced to hold the soulmate theory became more positive or more negative about their partner, depending on their Time 1 belief about whether their partner was a good fit, and this was especially true for those who did not hold a soulmate theory beforehand, that is, they were low on the chronic soulmate measure at Time 1.) Neither of the two possible four-way interactions involving either the chronic soulmate theory or the chronic work-it-out theory was significant (\( ps > .02 \)).5 Again, effects of theory accessibility created by the experimental manipulation temporarily overrode the effects of chronic theory accessibility due to individual differences.

**Discussion**

The major goal of this research was to examine whether relationship theories play a causal role in relationship satisfaction and how such theories influence the cognitive distortions people make when facing a threat to their relationship. Past research had provided correlational evidence of the effect of relationship theories but the causal direction of this association had yet to be firmly established experimentally. Moreover, little was known about the cognitive mechanisms involved in this association.

In Study 1, participants’ relationship theories were manipulated and their relationship satisfaction was assessed to determine the causal direction of this association. Participants’ beliefs about whether their partner was the right person for them were assessed 3 weeks prior to theory manipulation. Results from this study indicated that the relationship theories did indeed play a causal role in affecting relationship satisfaction, with beliefs about one’s partner moderating this association. Participants induced to hold the soulmate theory reported much greater relationship satisfaction when they believed they were with the right person and much greater dissatisfaction when they believed they were not with the right person. The effect of partner fit was significantly smaller for work-it-out theorists. A similar, albeit marginally significant, pattern was found for perceived

### TABLE 3: Study 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Relationship Theory and Partner Fit Predicting Overall Distortions Index (by Threat Condition)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Under threat</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Partner fit</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner fit</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Theory</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Under no threat</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Partner fit</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner fit</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.25†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory condition</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit × Theory</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.27†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** Partner fit = beliefs about partner fit, theory condition = theory participant induced to hold, Fit × Theory = the product of beliefs about partner fit and relationship theory, Fit × Threat = the product of beliefs about partner fit and threat condition. Under threat: \( R^2 = .27 \) for Step 1; \( \Delta R^2 = .32, F(1, 51) = 22.8, p < .001 \), for Step 2. Under no threat: \( R^2 = .08 \) for Step 1; \( \Delta R^2 = .07, F(1, 42) = 3.12, p < .10 \), for Step 2.

\( p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .001. \)

### TABLE 4: Study 2: Correlations Between Partner Fit and Distortions for Soulmate and Work-It-Out Theorists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distortion</th>
<th>Under threat</th>
<th>Soul theory</th>
<th>Work theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soul theory</td>
<td>.86***</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work theory</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( ** p < .01, *** p < .001. \)
agreement with one’s partner, such that those induced to hold the soulmate theory perceived more agreement if with the right person and less agreement if not with the right person. For those induced to hold the work-it-out theory, the association between beliefs about one’s partner and perceived agreement did not reach significance.

Study 1 joins past research in presenting evidence that the implicit or folk theories people bring to their relationships affect their satisfaction with the relationship. However, it goes beyond past research by experimentally manipulating these theories. Because finding the right person is so important for those holding a soulmate theory, their perceived success at this enhances the evaluation of their relationship and their perceived failure takes away from it. The relationship satisfaction of work-it-out theorists is far less tied to their beliefs about their specific relationship partner.

The goal of Study 2 was to investigate the cognitive processes through which people’s relationship theories exert their influence. In line with predictions, those induced to hold a soulmate theory were more likely to focus on the strengths and virtues of their partner when they thought they were with the right person, and they were more likely to dwell on their partner’s faults if they did not think they were with the right person. This polarizing effect held particularly strongly when participants induced to hold the soulmate theory also encountered negative relationship-threatening information. Work-it-out theorists, on the other hand, took negative threatening information into account and then uniformly applied it to partners who they thought were and were not a good fit. It is important to note here that the negative feedback indeed was threatening to both those induced to hold soulmate and those induced to hold work-it-out theories. Soulmate theorists could potentially interpret the feedback as saying that their partner is not the right person and the relationship is doomed to fail; work-it-out theorists could potentially interpret the feedback as saying that “working-it-out” will not be possible because of problems with the relationship and/or one’s partner that will prevent one from doing so. The information is threatening in that it has very negative implications, whichever theory one is induced to believe. However, this threatening information produced either bolstering of the relationship or augmentation of the threat for soulmate theorists and it produced evenhanded application for work-it-out theorists.

It is remarkable that those induced to hold a work-it-out theory—who had, on average, dated their partner for a year and a half—showed virtually no effect of partner fit and could react so evenhandedly to relationship-threatening information. They heard negative information about their relationship and accepted it without either (a) compensating by dwelling on their partner’s good qualities or (b) adding more bad qualities to support their preexisting beliefs about their partner’s fit. Of course, it is hard to know exactly how to think about such a fair appraisal and application of negative information. In some ways, such nondefensiveness may be quite healthy. But in other ways, this level-headedness may actually be irrational in that such experience with a partner should color one’s judgment of new information. From a statistical point of view, the argument for why preexisting beliefs and experience should affect how we interpret new information is Bayes’s theorem (i.e., we should evaluate new data in light of data already known). From a relationship research point of view, biased (at least positively biased) perceptions of one’s partner can be a good thing and a sign that the relationship will deepen and grow. Whether the work-it-out theorists are showing an open mind and a mature love based on nondefensive, realistic assessments or whether their evenhandedness blocks some healthy “positive illusions” about their partner that might foster intimacy is at least partly an empirical question for future work involving both experimental and naturalistic study.

Such future experimental and naturalistic studies can examine both how negative and positive information that fits with or contradicts one’s prior beliefs may affect the relationship. Given the way positive emotions can “broaden and build” an individual’s repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998), events or information that elicit these same emotions also may “broaden and build” a couple’s strengths. If either work-it-out theorists or soulmate theorists who believe they are with the wrong person are unable to fully take advantage of these “broaden and build” opportunities, their relationships may become that much less resilient than those of soulmate theorists who believe they are with the right person.

RELATIONSHIP THEORIES: CHRONIC AND TEMPORARY

In Franiuk et al. (2002), people’s relationship theories were found to be relatively stable over time (r = .74 across approximately 8 months), and moreover, people’s theories did not change as they left or entered relationships. In the present research, our relationship theory induction produced substantial effects, and it almost completely overrode the effect of the chronic theories. The present studies that manipulated relationship theory situationally do not negate the results of the earlier article examining relationship theory as an individual difference. Many psychological constructs show stability over time and yet respond dramatically to situational primes and variations (for example, political and social attitudes [Bless, Igou, Schwartz, & Waenke, 2000; Schuman, Kalton, & Ludwig, 1983], judgments of life satisfaction [Diener, 1996], independent versus interde-
pendent selves [Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991], and implicit theories of personality [Hong & Chiu, 2001]). The present research complements the earlier work of Franiuk and colleagues (2002) by showing that relationship theories are important as a situationally manipulated construct as well as a stable individual difference. It appears that relationship theories can be both chronically and temporarily accessible.

Because our situation construct (induced theories) was so powerful, there was little for our person construct (chronic theories) to contribute. Admittedly, our manipulation in these studies has ignored important Person × Situation interactions that may be explored in future research. One question for future study involves not just what types of situations call forth one type of theory or another but how various situations might interact with chronic theories to produce meaningful “behavioral profiles” (Mischel & Shoda, 1999). There are several other important directions for future research. In the present article, we investigated only one cognitive mechanism by which relationship theories may affect relationship satisfaction and evaluations of one’s partner. It will be important to subsequently examine the interpersonal behaviors and interactions that arise from the intrapersonal emotions and thoughts that have been documented in the present work. How, when, and to what extent these thoughts and feelings are externalized and exhibited in actual behavior that will draw either a positive or a negative response from one’s partner are likely to affect the volatility of the relationship as well as its ultimate success or failure. In Study 2, threat magnified the effect on cognitive distortions. However, in addition to simply magnifying cognitive effects, relationship threat also may be an important construct in determining when these cognitive tendencies get amplified enough to be externalized in behavior. It is possible that threat may animate these cognitions and turn them into action.

Overall, it is reasonable to assume that a major relationship threat is going to be bad for relationships. But in the relationships of soulmate theorists who are generally happy with their partners, perhaps a small to moderate amount of threat can provide the catalyst to make their cognitions about their partners even more positive, and it may provide the impetus for externalizing these thoughts into positive, affectionate behaviors that bring couples closer together and provide a foundation for future relationship success. The high positivity under threat for those who held a soulmate theory and believed they were with the right person suggests this might be a possibility.

It is probably not universally better to hold a soulmate or work-it-out theory (Franiuk et al., 2002). The unbiased processing that appears to follow from holding a work-it-out theory and the biased processing that appears to follow from holding a soulmate theory both have their advantages and disadvantages. Nondefensive, unbiased processing can be mature, realistic, and beneficial, but it potentially robs us of some of the positively biased thoughts and feelings that can help sustain a relationship. Whether holding a soulmate theory increases satisfaction depends greatly on beliefs about the relationship partner. Under soulmate theory, relationship satisfaction is strongly tied to believing that one has found the right person. Under work-it-out theory, finding the right person is much less important (although it still contributes to relationship satisfaction; see Franiuk et al., 2002). Besides affecting satisfaction, Study 2 further indicated that holding a soulmate theory rather than a work-it-out theory can have mixed effects—it can lead people to downplay a partner’s faults if they think they are with the right person and augment these faults if they are not with the right person. Whether this thinking style is adaptive or maladaptive is another issue: Seeing past a partner’s flaws may help to minimize arguments, increase satisfaction, and produce upward spirals of positive interactions in some relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), but it also may keep people in dysfunctional relationships when a more realistic assessment might lead them to break up (Puente & Cohen, 2003; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). It is harder to make the case that finding fault is adaptive because finding and concentrating on a partner’s flaws (at least in North American culture) seems sure to doom what might otherwise be a successful relationship. However, negative distortions too may have their place in hastening the breakup of relationships that are unlikely to work.

Thus, although this research points to the different thinking styles and strategies that derive from soulmate and work-it-out theory, other work is needed to determine when soulmate versus work-it-out strategies are most productive (see also Knee, Patrick, Victor, & Neighbors, in press). We think it is unlikely that one response style will always lead people to maximal happiness. The question is then not whether the soulmate theory or work-it-out theory is optimal but when each style of thinking about the relationship should be used. The experimental design of this article is advantageous for theoretical reasons of experimental control, but it also has very positive and practical implications. That people can shift at least temporarily toward a work-it-out or a soulmate style when these theories are made temporarily accessible implies that people have some choice in how they approach their relationship at any given moment. The present research demonstrates experimentally that relationship theories are causally important for how people think and feel in a relationship. That people can shift
back and forth between these theories also gives hope that people can pick and choose the best aspects of both.

NOTES

1. The articles used for relationship theory manipulation are available from the first author upon request.

2. Induced theory was an experimentally manipulated dichotomous variable and not a continuous variable. We present the within-cell means between partner fit and the dependent variable (rather than the bs) so that readers can see the effect size (Aiken & West, 1991, pp. 123-126).

3. Positive narrative statements actually reflected a ratio of positive statements to total statements in the narratives to control for participants who wrote more than the others. Negative narrative statements similarly reflected the ratio of negative statements to total narrative statements.

4. Negative refutations or exaggerations were excluded because the number of negative refutations or exaggerations was very low—only 13% of participants made these types of statements (as compared to almost 30% of participants making positive refutations and exaggerations) and only 2% wrote more than one of these types of statements (as compared to 15% of participants writing more than one positive refutation or exaggeration). If negative distortions are included in the overall index of distortions, the crucial three-way Beliefs About Partner Fit × Theory Condition × Threat Condition interaction is still significant at p < .05.

5. There was no main effect of the chronic work-it-out theory variable. In the final step, there was a main effect of the chronic soulmate theory variable, such that greater endorsement of the soulmate theory produced fewer distortions (t = -2.16, p < .05). However, it is difficult to know how to interpret this. The main effect was not significant in either of the first two steps shown in Table 4 and was qualified by the Chronic Theory × Induced Theory × Beliefs About Partner interaction described in the text. (Neither the three-way interaction nor the chronic soulmate theory main effect was significant in Study 1.)

6. Note that we use the word threatening here as indicating “objectively” negative information about the relationship. In other psychological research, threatening is defined as that which provokes a defensive reaction (i.e., we know that something is a threat because it provokes a defensive response). This second operationalization of threat, which defines the stimulus in terms of the response it elicits, is fine for some purposes. However, it was not fine for our purposes because we wanted to see how the same objective stimulus could produce three very different types of responding (bolstering of the relationship, augmentation of the threat, or even-handed application). Our results do not indicate that one will never find defensive responding among work-it-out theorists. Future research can examine what sorts of information or experiences produce defensive responses. Threats can take a variety of forms—disapproving parents, infidelities, tragic accidents or misfortunes that befall a couple, extended periods of separation or physical distance, cultural clashes between partners, a stubborn refusal of one or both parties to discuss problems, and so on. Which types of experiences or information elicit defensiveness for people holding one relationship theory or another and how such defensiveness manifests itself differently are interesting areas for future research (see also Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003).

REFERENCES


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