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Romantic attraction and conflict negotiation among late adolescent and early adult romantic couples

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Abstract

In a sample of 35 couples (college students, aged 18–24) who were dating for no longer than six months, each partner was given a semi-structured interview to assess the nature and intensity of romantic preoccupation with his or her lover. In addition, partners were jointly given a revealed differences task in which they were asked to discuss the issue of their highest disagreement and to arrive at an agreement. Findings suggested that higher levels of romantic preoccupation are related to partners' inclination to downplay their disagreement and to negotiate their differences less successfully. The same assessment six weeks later showed that where levels of romantic preoccupation among romantic partners stayed stable, the partners showed an increasing capability to recognize and face their disagreements and even a tendency to better negotiate disagreements started to emerge. Findings of this study suggest that two processes operate within a bond between romantic partners. The first process refers to the attraction or preoccupation between partners and the second refers to the quality of conflict negotiation that evolves over time. Where at the initial stage of a romantic bond the attraction process overshadows partners' ability to acknowledge and deal with differences, the two processes develop differently over time.

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Introduction

In her seminal work, Fisher (Fisher, 1998, 2006; Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, Brown, 2002) differentiated between two types of love experiences: romantic attraction and romantic attachment. Romantic attraction evolved to motivate individuals to select among potential partners and characterizes the initial phase of a romantic encounter. The attachment and caregiving systems that characterize advanced stages of a relationship are aimed to maintain the relationship and secure its continuity in order to promote the well-being of offspring (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Hazan & Zeifman, 1999). Though attraction characterizes an initial phase of a romantic encounter, once encounters are sustained, interchanges become rule governed (Hinde, 1997, p.37). The purpose of this study is to examine how the two romantic experiences of (1) attraction and (2) interactional exchanges act in concert during the initial stages of a romantic encounter. For this purpose, the interplay of these two love and interactional experiences and their change after a short period of time among late adolescent and early adult romantic couples were examined.

Fisher's work evolved within an evolutionary framework (Fisher, 1992, 1998, 2006; Fisher et al., 2002) suggesting that humans are programmed to build and maintain mating relationships for survival and procreation. Contingent upon the biological network for reproduction, adolescents and young adults, just like more mature adults, are susceptible to the search for a partner, the capacity to be emotionally swept away by romantic love and the desire to invest in maintaining a relationship (Fisher, 2006).

On the one hand, attraction has evolved to enable individuals to select preferable potential mating partners and to motivate them to focus their courtship attention on these individuals, thereby conserving courtship time and energy (Fisher, 1998; Fisher et al., 2002). Attraction is characterized by elation, heightened energy, mood swings, focused attention, obsessive thinking about a partner and craving for emotional union with him or her (Aron et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2002). Individuals reporting feelings of attraction experience a host of labile psychophysiological responses such as exhilaration and euphoria. They often think about the beloved obsessively, to the extent of "intrusive thinking." Their thoughts may include exclusively focused attention on the beloved and his/her well-being as well as worries about the stability of the relationship (Fisher, 1998). Earlier, Tennov (1979) coined the term "limerance" to describe intrusive thoughts about the partner and a desire for reciprocation of the feeling.

The other experience of love termed as attachment or companionate love (Fisher, 2006) is characterized by maintenance of proximity, affiliative gestures, and expressions of calm and content when in contact with the long-term mating partner. Similarly, within the framework of marital relationships and social psychology, adult as well as adolescent romantic relationships have been conceptualized in terms of affiliation, intimacy, attachment, and commitment (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Intimacy leads to a deeper and more committed form of a relationship (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). In turn, the presence of commitment leads to a long term relationship enhancing the bonding between partners, expressing deeper levels of caring for each other (Brown, 1999) and laying the ground for the optimal development of offspring (Fisher, 2006).

Accordingly, romantic relationships have mainly been described as being positive, providing a sense of closeness, help, and security (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Bukowski, Hoza, &

Bovin, 1994; Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Moreover, romantic relationships at their initial stages, and in particular among adolescents, are often romanticized and described in terms of absolutes, idealism (Fischer & Alapack, 1987), fascination (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987), and a sense of endless love (Gray & Steinberg, 1999).

However, everyday experience shows that disagreements and conflicts are also a common part of romantic relationships. Anger, envy, and contempt color all relationships and can even be considered integral to them (Josselson, 1992). Few partners, even those in warm and intimate relationships, are able to avoid disagreements. In one account, adolescents report an average of one or two disagreements with close friends every day (Laursen, 1993). Moreover, characteristics or behaviors that might have attracted partners may turn into a source of stress and disappointment over time (Scharf & Scharf, 1997). For example, expressions of care that might have originally attracted a partner might after a while be perceived as a penchant for control and become a source of strain to the relationship and its stability.

Yet, disappointments and disagreements are not necessarily bad (Shantz, 1987). On the contrary, the mere presence of conflict may reveal less about the quality of a relationship than does the way in which the conflict is handled (Perry, Perry, & Kennedy, 1992). Though conflict may provoke relationship perturbation or even disintegration, it may also provide an opportunity to define roles, improve communication, and strengthen interconnections (Hartup, 1992). Disagreements can serve as a force of equilibrium, because it can help partners from becoming “hopelessly addicted” to each other (Sternberg, 1998, p. 390). Therefore, effective conflict resolution is a hallmark of competence in close relationships and their quality. In particular, in voluntary relationships like romantic partnerships, mutually satisfactory resolutions are key to the continued harmony, satisfaction, and even the survival of the relationship.

Like discord with friends, disagreements between romantic partners provide an opportunity for partners to define their relationship and differentiate among areas of agreement and disagreement (Hartup, 1996; Laursen, 1993). As with peers, adolescents reported using more compromise followed by distraction and avoidance rather than expressing overt anger when discussing and negotiating a conflict with their romantic partners (Feldman & Gowen, 1998). A recent meta-analysis suggests that adolescence is marked by a gradual developmental shift in resolution tactics, as indicated by successively lower levels of coercion and higher levels of negotiation across childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001).

Assessment of conflict management strategies among undergraduate romantic partners has shown that though the partners used mainly constructive conflict management techniques, they allowed themselves to indicate that they simultaneously had negative feelings (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). When asked to reflect on how they interacted during a task given to them, they tended to describe themselves as supportive, moderately humorous and persuading, and a little conceding and conflictual. This suggests that conflict management consists of constructive encounters that do not conceal existing difficulties or reservations and are central for the stability of a relationship (Cramer, 2002).

The quality of a romantic relationship is often indicated by the sense of passion, love or intimacy between partners, however, the importance of partners' ability to withstand differences and resolve them successfully cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, the ability to resolve disagreements constructively is crucial for keeping a relationship intact (Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran & Anbar, 2006). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that it takes time for a romantic encounter to develop into a sustained and balanced relationship (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999).

It can be assumed that the balancing of self and other needs are different in the initial and latter stages of a relationship. For example, collaboration for mutual interest (Selman, 1980) is more relevant in a lasting relationship than in an interaction that is not sustained. Conceptually, this raises the question of whether or when romantic encounters become relationships, namely when partners become capable of addressing differences, resolving them, and as a result deepening the sense of closeness. An interaction (or an attraction) between two partners is not a relationship. Only when encounters between two persons are sustained do they become relationships that involve rule governed interchanges over an extended period of time (Hinde, 1997, p.37).

Taken together, two romantic experiences can be operationalized. The first, elaborated more within the evolution-oriented theories (see Fisher, 1998; Fisher et al., 2002) is characterized by the need to select a partner and intensify a romantic attraction which drives individuals to become highly focused on their object of love, reorder daily routines and become dependent on the relationship (Fisher et al., 2002, p. 416). Attraction, lust, mutual fascination, and idealization of one's partner characterize the early stage of a romantic relationship (Diamond, 2003; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988) and may last for up to three years (Fisher, 1998) though its intensity might start to dwindle after a couple of months (Bruce & Sanders, 2001). The function of attraction is probably to bring two partners together and enable a viable sexual union (Fisher, 1998) and is characterized by elevated emotional states (Sternberg, 1998).

The second love experience, elaborated more within the developmental and social psychology literature, portrays romantic relationships as an intimate bond between partners where partners negotiate their relationship and must deal with disagreements and conflicts. In order to sustain the relationship, feelings of attachment and companionship are crucial (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). Moreover, the longevity of a relationship will be better demonstrated by the ability of partners to negotiate and balance needs of self and other truly than by their sense of closeness or attraction (Fisher, 2006). In particular, acknowledgement of disagreements and their resolution was found to be inevitable for the sustainment of the relationship and its positive evolution over time (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Shulman et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study is to examine how the two love experiences of attraction and focusing passionately on the partner on the one hand, and that of negotiation and balancing disagreements (in the service of consolidating the relationship), on the other hand, operate in an evolving romantic relationship. It is reasonable to assume that the longing for the emotional union may leave less room for the negotiation of the relationship as a partner's heightened attraction leads him or her to focus nearly exclusively on the positive qualities of the partner and to overlook negative traits or disagreements (Murray & Holmes, 1997). It is only after a period of time, when differences start to emerge and are acknowledged, that a more stable and reality-based relationship can develop (Hinde, 1997).

The initial stage of a romantic bond is probably the best arena to examine the interaction of the two love experiences (or evolved systems, Fisher, 2006). It is possible that during the initial stage of a bond when focusing attention and being preoccupied with the beloved is paramount, the bond is more governed by attraction. If this is true, the amount of romantic attraction may be related to a tendency to disregard disagreements. However, over time when attraction may start to decrease and interchanges between partners may become more rule governed (Hinde, 1997), partners may be more likely to become more aware of differences, address them and demonstrate the capability to resolve their disagreements. This may be crucial for the development and longevity of a positive relationship.

A wide body of developmental literature has focused on conflict resolution and its assessment as outlined above (see Laursen et Al., 2001). However, less is known about the nature of romantic attractions and their change over time. The majority of existing knowledge is based on phenomenological studies (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987; Tennov, 1979). Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) and Sternberg (1998) described and operationalized the intense preoccupation and longing for reunion with a romantic partner as one of the components of love and developed measures to assess the intensity of this passion. These approaches clearly describe romantic attraction. However, as they originated within the framework of social psychology, in our view, they may not fully capture the evolutionary nature of attraction and its expression.

In order to better capture the evolutionary nature of attraction, in the current study, we draw the parallels between the heightened focus on a romantic partner and the way mothers are invested in their newborns. Winnicott (1956) was the first to draw attention to the state of heightened sensitivity that develops in mothers toward the end of pregnancy and lasts for the first months of the infant's life. During this period, the mother is deeply focused on the infant to the relative exclusion of all else. This preoccupation heightens her ability to become familiar with the newborn's unique signals and, as a consequence, to anticipate them while forming a relationship with the infant.

Application of the preoccupation constructs to the understanding of romantic attractions might also help explain the nature and development of the initial stages of romantic encounters. As in the mother-infant relationship, romantic partners become highly focused and preoccupied with their object of love to the extent of "intrusive thinking." The aim of this state is probably to secure of the relationship. However, while this condition is functional for the selection of a mate, it is questionable whether a sustained state of elevated preoccupation will interfere with the inevitable demands of sustained interactions such as resolving disagreements, which is necessary for the development of a mature, intimate and committed relationship.

We hypothesized that at the initial stage of a romantic liaison the intensity of romantic attraction (preoccupation with the partner and the relationship) will be related to partners' ability to acknowledge and negotiate differences. However, the intensity of the romantic attraction is expected to decrease over time whereas partners' ability to address and resolve disagreements will increase. Subsequently, the frequency of associations between intensity of attraction and the quality interactional exchanges will decrease over a period of six weeks as partners become more competent in acknowledging and resolving their differences.

Personal accounts of lovers as well as former writings suggest that during the initial stages of a romantic liaison, partners tend to romanticize the relationship, describe it in terms of absolutes (Fischer & Alapack, 1987), and overlook disagreement. It is then reasonable to assume that self-reports on the quality of the relationship provided by individuals during the initial phases of romance may not reveal its true nature. Therefore, in the current study, assessment of the quality of a relationship is based on direct observations and not on self reports.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited through flyers that were placed throughout colleges and in a local newspaper aimed at young people. The sample in this report consists of 35 couples (aged 18–24,

attending colleges in the Northeast; 50 percent were of European–American decent and the rest belonged to other ethnic groups), who considered themselves to be romantic couples, dating for less than 6 months (mean length of dating—4.32 months). As part of a broader assessment, couples were given a semi-structured interview to assess the nature and intensity of intrusive thoughts of lovers. In addition, partners were given a revealed differences task in which they were asked to discuss the issue of their highest disagreement and to arrive at an agreement. Couples underwent the same assessment six weeks later.

At the initial assessment, 45 couples were interviewed. Ten couples were not available for the second assessment. Of the ten, seven couples had one or both partners not available due to objective reasons like having left town or moving to a different college, two couples were not willing to do the second assessment and one couple broke up.

Instruments

The *Romantic Love and Inventory of Thoughts and Actions Interview* (Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2007) is an instrument patterned according to *The Yale Inventory of Parental Thoughts and Actions* (Leckman, et al., 1999). It focuses on an individual's preoccupation and heightened sensitivity concerning a romantic partner and his/her well being (Leckman et al., 1999).

In this report, three scales measuring lovers' preoccupation were derived:

Romantic preoccupation

This index was derived from 7 items detailing the intensity of preoccupation with the partner. Example items are: "Thoughts about your partner interrupt daily routine"; "Found yourself counting the number of days you have been together with your partner". Cronbach alpha = .69.

Anxious attraction

This index was derived from 7 items assessing the intensity of intrusive thoughts on whether the relationship is secure and will evolve. Example items are: "Had thoughts about things between you and partner not being just right"; "Have been worried or preoccupied about how to keep your partner's interest in you". Cronbach alpha = .77.

Concern for partner's well-being

This index was derived from 4 items detailing caring actions and thoughts about the partner. Example items are: "Had thoughts about your partner's safety"; "Had thoughts about your partner's physical comfort". Cronbach alpha = .63.

Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 – never; 6 – very frequently) the extent to which each statement characterizes their relationship with their partner. Items were averaged to form scale scores. No significant correlations were found among the three scales.

In order to establish validity of the *Romantic Love and Inventory of Thoughts and Actions Interview* and its derived scales, two additional instruments were given to participants. First, the *Passion* subscale of Strenberg's (1998) Triangular Love Scale that assesses behaviors or thoughts

similar to those found in the Romantic Preoccupation scale (i.e., “I find myself thinking about — frequently during the day”) was administered. Significant correlations were found between the Romantic Preoccupation scale and Passion scale, $r = .339$, $p < .01$ for the first assessment and $r = .420$, $p < .01$ for the second assessment. In addition, the Dependency subscale of Blatt’s DEQ personality inventory (Blatt, D’Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976) that assesses wishes to be cared for, loved and protected, and fear of being abandoned (e.g., “Without the support of others who are close to me, I would be helpless”) was also administered. Significant correlations were found between the Anxious Attraction scale and the Dependency, $r = .375$, $p < .01$ for the first assessment and $r = .240$, $p < .05$ for the second assessment.

The revealed differences task

Each partner completed the Knox (1971) inventory to measure the level of disagreement between partners on ten domains: political views, friends, money, sex, interpersonal communication, giving or accepting attention, relationships with family, leisure time and activities, eating and drinking habits, and jealousy. Each partner was asked to rate, on a scale from 1 – low to 100 – high, the intensity of disagreement or conflict pertaining to each domain. A broad scale (a range of 100) was used so as to minimize discomfort about admitting to discord in the romantic relationship.

The male’s and female’s completed Knox inventories were returned to the interviewer. The interviewer compared partners’ levels of disagreements and told them the issue that had the greatest discrepancy of ratings. For example, the female rated 40 and the male 15 on the “giving or accepting attention” domain. In the case of more than one issue fitting the greatest discrepancy category, an issue was randomly selected by the interviewer. Partners were then asked to discuss this issue and arrive at an agreement. This joint discussion was audiotaped and later transcribed. The interviewer was present during the discussion but refrained from intervening.

Scales assessing interaction patterns were developed in a former study (Shulman et al., 2006). Patterns of tactics used for understanding and handling a disagreement; the ways couples disagreed and reacted when shown that they were in conflict, the way they negotiated the disagreement, and finally how couples came to an agreement were all identified. In addition, attention was paid to the emotional tone of the situation, words that reflected coercion or compromise, and the length of the interaction. The literature on conflict resolution in general (cited above) and between romantic partners (Welsh, Galliher, Kawaguchi, & Rostosky, 1999) guided initial readings of the discourse. Finally, the literature on the interactions of married couples (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998, Gottman & Levenson, 2000) was also considered during the construction of scales.

This led to the development of scales representing the interaction between partners. The five-point (1 – low; 5 – high) rating scales, four dyadic and one individual (Negative Affect) that were completed for each member of the dyad were as follows:

1. *Confrontation*: the extent to which the interaction between partners was confrontational and tense. (“You don’t care, you want to go out every day, you think that since your father is rich (laughs) then money is nothing, 30 dollars is nothing, you want to spend money every evening. I don’t like it”).

2. *Quality of negotiation ability*: the extent of the ability to clarify a disagreement, understand the other's point of view, and negotiate a solution that considers both partners' perspectives. ("I don't think it is 80. It bothers us from time to time. Each of us has to learn to insist on what he likes. And we learn how to accept something that the other doesn't like. That's life").
3. *Positive affect*: perceived positive atmosphere and mutual considerateness during the interaction. ("Male: We agree on most of the (Female laughs), on most we agree...; Female: of the conflicts").
4. *Minimizing the conflict*: the tendency to minimize, deny, or underestimate the conflict ("Oh, it's not a problem. When I rated 50 I meant 5, and it's not a problem").
5. *Negative affect*: the extent to which one partner displays criticism, is cynical, or demanding while negotiating or while the other presents his or her point of view. ("OK, I have more of a problem with your friends, they don't interest me, they're boring and I don't like them").

Scales were constructed to assess the interaction on the dyadic level. However, when the scales were constructed it appeared that that males and females differed with regard to expressing anger and criticism during the interaction. Therefore, the Negative affect scale was rated separately for female and male partners of each dyad. Together, four dyadic and two individual scales were rated.

Transcripts of the interactions lacking any identification of couples' identity were rated independently by two different raters who were trained on a different set of couple interactions. The raters were also blind to the hypotheses. Cohen Kappas for the six scales ranged .71 to .86. All disagreements were discussed to consensus.

Results

Plan of Analysis

In line with the study's assumptions, correlations between preoccupation indices and conflict resolution patterns at the first assessment were calculated. In order to capture possible differences over time, romantic preoccupation and conflict resolution patterns at the first assessment (*T1*) and at the second assessment, after a six week period (*T2*), were compared. In addition, associations between preoccupation indices and conflict resolution patterns at the second assessment were calculated to examine the association between the two over the inter-assessment period of six weeks. Acknowledging the sample size, exploratory hierarchical regressions were conducted in order to test the overall significance of the associations between preoccupation indices and each conflict resolution patterns at the two assessments.

Associations between romantic preoccupation and capability of resolving disagreements among partners dating for less than six months

Correlations between indices of romantic preoccupation and disagreement resolution tactics during the first assessment while controlling for length of relationship and partners' age were calculated. Length of relationship and partners' age did not have any effect on attained

Table 1

Correlations between romantic preoccupation and disagreement resolution tactics among young men and women (*italics*) – first assessment

	Confrontation	Negotiation	Positive affect	Minimizing	Negative affect <i>F</i>	Negative affect <i>M</i>
Romantic preoccupation	–.266	–.377*	.126	.353*	–.102	–.219
Anxious attraction	.050	–.317*	–.253	.444**	.078	.001
Concern for partner	–.395*	–.078	.330*	.303*	–.199	.109
	–.104	–.334	.098	.264	–.155	–.112
	.054	–.261	–.046	.095	.075	–.113
	.092	–.366*	–.333*	.296*	.054	.147

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

correlations. Since romantic preoccupation was assessed on the individual level, patterns of associations for each romantic partner, male and female, are presented separately. As can be seen in Table 1, *Romantic Preoccupation* was negatively associated with the capability to negotiate differences and positively associated with a tendency to minimize disagreements for both men and women. In addition, among men, *Anxious Attraction* was associated with a lower tendency to confront the partner and a higher tendency to minimize the disagreement and show more positive affect during the joint discussion. Among women, *Anxious Attraction* was related to a lower capability to successfully negotiate a disagreement. Additionally, a higher level of *Concern for Partner* was associated among women with a lower capability to address and negotiate a disagreement, a higher tendency to minimize the disagreement, and showing less positive affect during the joint discussion.

Taken together, it can be suggested that higher levels of romantic preoccupation are related to partners' inclination to downplay their disagreement and to negotiate their differences successfully.

Correlations between Sternberg's (1998) *Passion* scale and conflict resolution tactics did not yield any significant findings.

Levels of romantic preoccupation and conflict resolution tactics at the first assessment (T1) and at the second assessment after six weeks (T2)

Levels of the three indices of romantic preoccupations were calculated at the two assessments for men and women. No differences were found between the two assessments, and gender differences were not found as well. Moreover, levels of romantic preoccupation were almost identical at the two assessments. For example, mean level of *Preoccupation* at *T1* was $M = 4.47$ ($SD = .69$) and $M = 4.50$ ($SD = .78$) at *T2*; mean level of *Anxious Attraction* at *T1* was $M = 4.14$ ($SD = .72$) and $M = 4.20$ ($SD = .75$); and mean level of *concern for Partner* at *T1* was $M = 3.45$ ($SD = .72$) and $M = 3.54$ ($SD = .78$) at *T2*. Correlations between the two assessments for the three indices of romantic preoccupation were $r = .64$ ($p < .01$), $r = .54$ ($p < .01$), and $r = .41$ ($p < .05$), respectively.

Table 2

Mean levels and sds of conflict resolution tactics at *T1* and *T2*; *t* values and significance

	<i>T1</i>	<i>T2</i>	<i>t</i>
Confrontation	1.23 (0.75)	1.28 (0.76)	0.45
Negotiation	2.87 (1.35)	3.30 (1.43)	1.53 ⁺
Positive Affect	2.18 (0.98)	1.58 (0.86)	2.53*
Minimizing	3.07 (1.69)	1.98 (1.35)	3.27**
Negative Affect F	1.35 (0.72)	1.25 (0.54)	0.47
Negative Affect M	1.35 (0.670)	1.42 (0.77)	0.57

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Comparisons of the levels of conflict resolution tactics across the two assessments revealed a different pattern. As can be seen in Table 2, romantic partners at *T2*, were less likely to minimize their disagreement, exhibited a lower level of positive affect while discussing their disagreement, yet showed a tendency ($p < .10$) to better negotiate their disagreements.

Interestingly, although levels of romantic preoccupation among romantic partners stayed stable over the period of six weeks, partners showed an increasing capability to recognize and face their disagreements and a tendency to better negotiate disagreements even started to emerge.

Associations between romantic preoccupation and capability of resolving disagreements among partners at the second assessment following a period of six weeks (T2)

Patterns of correlations between indices of romantic preoccupation and disagreement resolution tactics during the second assessment recall the patterns found during the first assessment but were less common. Among men, only one significant correlation was found. The higher the level of reported Romantic Preoccupation at the second assessment, the less likely partners were to show an advanced level of negotiation, $r = -.312$, $p < .05$. Among women, romantic preoccupation was still more associated with conflict resolution tactics. A higher level of Romantic Preoccupation among women partners was related to a couple's higher tendency to minimize disagreements, $r = .351$, $p < .05$, to less confront each other, $r = -.450$, $p < .01$. Also, more anxiously attracted women were less likely to exhibit negative affect while discussing a disagreement, $r = -.464$, $p < .01$. In addition, a higher level of Anxious Attraction among women partners was related to a couple's higher tendency to minimize disagreements, $r = .358$, $p < .05$.

Acknowledging the sample size, hierarchical regressions examining the simultaneous contribution of six preoccupation indices (three men's scores and three women's scores) to each conflict resolution pattern were examined on an exploratory level.

Results showed that men's Romantic Preoccupation at the first assessment explained 22.7 percent of couples' confrontation ($\beta = -.452$, $p < .05$) and 21.6% of couples' negotiation ($\beta = -.406$, $p < .05$) at the *T1* conflict resolution task. The more men were romantically preoccupied, the less confrontation and negotiation were observed during couples' discussion of disagreements. Women's Romantic Preoccupation at the first assessment explained 30.0% of couples' tendency to minimize their disagreements ($\beta = .412$, $p < .05$). The more the female

partner was romantically preoccupied, the more the couple tended to minimize their disagreements at the *T1* joint task.

In addition, women's Anxious Attraction at the second assessment explained 23.2% of minimization during the joint task at *T2*, $\beta = .356$, $p < .05$, and 15.7% of women's level of negative affect during *T2* joint task $\beta = -.514$, $p < .01$.

Taken together, at *T1*, men's romantic preoccupation was associated with lower confrontation and negotiation whereas women's romantic preoccupation was associated with a higher level of minimization observed during the joint task. At *T2*, only women's preoccupation indices were related to minimization of disagreement and a lower tendency of women to exhibit negative affect during the joint task.

Discussion

The current study examined two processes operating within the bond between romantic partners during the initial stages of their romantic liaison. The first process refers to the attraction or preoccupation between partners and the second refers to the process of interactional exchanges. Attraction refers to the elation, intense preoccupations and desire for physical proximity and oneness. Interactional exchanges include partners' ability to acknowledge and negotiate disagreements that develops along with sustained interactions between partners over time.

Our operationalization of the concept of preoccupation consisting of Romantic Preoccupation, Anxious Attraction, Concern for Partner's Well Being adapted from the mother–infant domain, helped us to articulate the “passionate” stage (Fisher, 1998) or “limerence” (Tennov, 1979) characterized by romantic infatuation (Hatfield, Schmitz, Cornelius, & Rapson, 1988). Lovers described themselves as being focused on their partner to the extent that thoughts about their partner interrupt their daily routine. This preoccupation with the lover recalls Tennov's (1979) descriptions of the desire for proximity and physical contact and feelings of excitement when receiving the partner's attention. However, our measure, particularly the scale of romantic preoccupation, consists also of behaviors that accompany preoccupation (for example; “Having trouble making decisions about little things concerning your partner that other people might not think twice about”). Interestingly, despite the association found between our measure of preoccupation and Sternberg's (1998) *Passion* scale, only our measure was associated with partners' behavior during the joint conflict resolution task. It is possible that our measure that was developed within an evolutionary framework, focuses not only on feelings of attraction, but also on behaviors could better tap the evolutionary nature of romantic preoccupation. Yet, clarification of this issue will require future studies.

In line with the key hypothesis of the current study, findings showed that romantic preoccupation at the initial stage of a romantic liaison was significantly related to partners' ability to be aware of and negotiate differences when facing a disagreement. The more partners were preoccupied, the more they tended to downplay the revealed disagreements. It was common to hear a partner proclaiming after he or she was told of the revealed difference: “We had it (the disagreement) in the past not anymore” or “But it is nothing. It is not serious. It's not a conflict anymore!” Moreover, even when some negotiation was initiated, its quality was low as partners preferred to conceal their difference rather than explore it and damage their sense of harmony.

From an evolutionary perspective, this behavior exemplifies the intensity of the early stage of a romantic liaison. At this early stage of liaison, partners are probably willing to overlook difficulties and differences for keeping the intense romantic attraction. Fisher and her colleagues described how “lovers express emotional dependence and change their habits to impress and/or remain in contact with the beloved.” (Fisher, Aron, & Brown, 2005, p. 59). Perhaps romantically preoccupied partners are directed by the principle of equity and are primarily invested in keeping or restoring equity as quickly as possible (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999). In keeping with equity theory, partners are likely to avoid potential costs such as conflict and inequity in order to prevent any damage to the intense romantic infatuation (Hatfield et al., 1988). While overlooking or even suppressing disagreements is functional in searching for or focusing on a partner, it may not be beneficial for the later stages of relationship and its maintenance. The reality of individual needs cannot be overlooked for a long period of time in a long-term relationship (Blatt & Blass, 1996). Friction may arise and the inability of partners to deal with disagreements may lead to discord and even the dissolution of the relationship. Moreover, expression of dissatisfaction within a context of unity can be a tool for better understanding a relationship (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), helpful for negotiating closeness and individuality (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Blatt & Blass, 1996; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999) and can contribute to subsequent intensification of the relationship. The confidence in being able to express individual and different views within a close relationship also meets the emerging needs of experiencing intimacy within a romantic relationship (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). In addition, negotiation and compromise allow partners to protect their own needs while simultaneously being attentive to the needs of their partner (Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1998).

Accordingly, the second assessment of conflict resolution tactics showed that compared to the first assessment, partners were less likely to keep a façade and more willing to accept the existence of a difference. They tended to minimize disagreements less often, the level of positive affect while discussing a disagreement decreased, and there were hints for an increasing capability to negotiate. Interestingly, despite that partners felt more comfortable to admit and discuss their differences, the level of preoccupation at the second assessment did not decrease. Thus while partners became more aware of their interchanges over the period of six weeks, their sense of attraction did not diminish.

This incompatibility between the two processes deserves further explanation. Fisher (2006) conceptualized romantic attraction and romantic attachment as two different brain systems aimed at different functions: courtship and long lasting relationships. Romantic attraction characterizes the initial stage of a romantic bond and lasts for a couple of months (Bruce & Sanders, 2001), or may continue even for up to three years (Fisher, et al., 2005). The average length of the romantic liaisons in the current study was of four and a half months. It is reasonable to assume that the majority of our participants were still in the initial phase of their romantic attraction.

It is plausible that being within such an emotionally rewarding exchange, partners are not only highly attracted to each other but also start to become more committed (Arriga, 2001). The sense of belonging probably provides partners with increasing confidence and the skills to cope effectively with disagreements that may arise in their relationship from time to time. As a result, a pro relationship orientation probably develops and this is likely to lead to a lasting relationship where care and security are provided (Arriga, 2001; p. 763). We may also speculate that the pace of the change from attraction to a stable and intimate relationship differs among couples. Our

data did not show that the length of the relationship (that was always less than six months) was not related to any of the indices of attraction or conflict negotiation.

Despite the different courses that the attraction and conflict negotiation revealed after a period of six weeks, the two processes continued to be interrelated suggesting they are also connected (Fisher, 2006). The more the female partners were preoccupied, the more minimizing of the disagreement was observed combined with a tendency to lower confrontation and lower expression of negative affect by the female partner. For men, level of preoccupation was associated with a couple's tendency to exhibit a lower level of negotiation.

It is probable that the two different processes evolve at a different pace with the acknowledgement and negotiation of disagreements starting to adapt to emerging expressions of individuality not too long after a bond was formed. It may be interesting to speculate that the healthy operation of motivation, preoccupation and reward brain systems is necessary for the sensation of romantic love and attracts partners. But in order to increase the chances of relationship maintenance, partners will have to learn to transform attraction or passionate love into companionate love combined with feelings of care and security (Diamond, 2004).

Our exploratory regression analyses revealed an interesting phenomenon. At the first assessment, both men's and women's romantic preoccupation was related to the quality of a couple's interaction. However, at the second assessment, conducted six weeks after the first assessment, only women's romantic preoccupation was associated with couples' patterns of conflict resolution. At *T2*, only women's level of preoccupation index was related to minimization of disagreement and lower tendency of women to exhibit negative affect during the joint task.

These gender differences are consistent with previous studies showing that females value closeness and care in their relationships more than males (Camerena, Sargiani, & Petersen, 1990) and their attraction to their partner continues to affect the couple's ability to address and resolve disagreements. Males tend to express themselves through separateness, and despite their being attracted to their partner, they are capable of seeing the need of balancing self and other in the emerging relationship. Moreover, our findings suggest that the greater emphasis that women put on commitment, caregiving and security than men (Gilligan, 1982) is already expressed and at the stage of attraction.

The current study employed two different methods for assessing a romantic bond; self reports and direct observations of couples' interaction. Employing the two methods and their examination after a short period of time enabled us to learn about the complexity of the initial stage of a romantic bond. At the initial assessment, lovers' focus on and craving for emotional reunion with their partner was demonstrated via their self reports and behavior during joint task. Self reports, direct observations, and their interrelatedness revealed the extent to which attraction affects both partners' inner experiences and external behavior. However, at the latter assessment, after a period of six weeks, it was the direct observations that revealed that despite the attraction, a parallel process of relationship development starts to take place. We believe that during the initial stages of a relationship, attraction might color the way partners feel about and describe their bond, and it is only through the "indirect" method of external observations that more complex processes could be detected.

It is important to note several caveats that underscore the need for additional research. It is the first time that the construct of romantic preoccupation has been operationalized. Though we were able to demonstrate its reliability over a period of six weeks, its significant association with

Sternberg's (1998) Passion scale and Blatt's Dependency subscale (Blatt et al., 1976), and its association with the observed interaction in couples, more studies are needed to replicate these findings. The measurement of romantic preoccupation has to be refined further.

The current study was planned to demonstrate the changes in the processes of attraction and conflict negotiation in the romantic bond. Though we were able to demonstrate the distinctiveness of each process and its change or stability over time, the six week follow-up could not capture the full process. A number of follow-ups of romantic couples and for longer periods of time could further point to the changes and the interplay of romantic attraction and conflict negotiation. In addition, though the issue of disagreement at the second assessment was not necessarily the same issue discussed at the first assessment, it is possible that partners were "more trained" to address disagreement after the *TI* joint discussion.

An additional limitation of this study is that it was conducted on college students and in particular on the age group that was recently termed as emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). It would be interesting to examine the interplay of the two processes on young adults who are supposed to become more committed in their romantic relationships and on adolescents whose romantic encounters are more transitional (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Finally, the process of attraction and its expression of preoccupation is activated by the reward brain systems (Aron et al. 2005; Fisher, 1998; Fisher et al., 2002, 2005; Fisher et al., 2005). Neuroimaging is just beginning to be employed in the study the brain basis of romantic relationships. Future studies incorporating neuroimaging assessments might elucidate the nature of adaptive and less adaptive forms of preoccupations during the stage of romantic attraction that may either predict long-term success or difficulties in making progress toward the phase of a sustained love relationship. Perhaps measurable malfunctions in these brain systems may also represent risk factors for impulsive involvement in hurtful relationships.

Despite the preliminary status of the assessment of romantic preoccupation, the results of this study add new insights to the current study of romantic relationships and in particular on the interplay between romantic attraction and interactional exchanges during the initial stages of a romantic liaison. In addition, the examination of self reports and direct observations point to the potential contribution of two methods of measurement in the study of romantic relationships and foreshadow further longitudinal and more detailed neuroimaging studies to combine brain responses to romantic stimuli with psychometrics over time and across domains of development.

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