



Research Article

# The effect of dispositional mindfulness on positive illusions in romantic relationships: dyadic approach

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## ABSTRACT

Implicit beliefs and cognitions largely direct behavioral and emotional interaction between intimate partners which in turn determines relationship satisfaction of both partners. Positive illusions, based on automatic thinking, represent a possible strategy for coping with relationship stress caused by the discrepancy between ideal and perceived partner's attributes. Contrary, research suggests that mindfulness, a conscious alternative to functioning on automatic pilot, has numerous benefits on relationship satisfaction and partner dynamic. However, the role of mindfulness in the context of relationship cognition is still not fully researched. The aim of this research was to examine the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and positive illusions about intimate partners. Survey was conducted online, and it included participants living in Croatia. Dyadic analysis included 106 heterosexual couples (mean age for women was 23.17 years, and for men 24.54 years) who were in a relationship for at least 6 months. Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale – MAAS is used as a measure of dispositional mindfulness, and Interpersonal Qualities Scale as a measure of partners' positive illusions. The actor and partner effects of dispositional mindfulness on illusory perception of partners' attributes were tested by Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. Contrary to hypothesized, mindfulness did not negatively affect biased perception of intimate partner. Partner effects for both men and women, and men's actor effect are shown to be significant in our model, suggesting that dispositional mindfulness contributed positively to partner's

illusory perception of their intimate partner attributes, on both dyad level and individual level only for men.

*Key words:* dispositional mindfulness, positive illusions, relationship cognition, dyadic approach

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## Introduction

Romantic relationship cognition, a relatively new field of research interest, includes persons' thoughts and beliefs about their intimate partner and romantic relationship (Karremans et al., 2017). Same as when thinking about social world around us, relationship cognition is not black or white, and mostly always contains some level of cognitive bias. Brewer (1991; as cited in Leonardelli et al., 2010) described this type of cognitive bias as a persons' tendency to perceive their significant other in a more positive light, emphasizing their virtues, and diminishing their flaws. This type of positive perception is common for all partners throughout the relationship but is mostly prominent for couples at the early start of their intimate relationship. Social psychologists agree that automatic thinking of one of the most important intimate relationships in adult age largely shapes and directs emotional reactions and behavior of both partners, affects relationship stability (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010), and is reference point upon which partners assess their relationship satisfaction (McNulty et al., 2013). Fletcher et al. (2000) note that cognitive evaluation of partner's attributes opposed to ideal is an underlying process that directs relationship dynamic and is naturally happening throughout the relationship. Further research suggests that this type of evaluation happens at automatic level of processing (Overall et al., 2006), suggesting that underlying cognitive schemas and implicit beliefs greatly shape intimate relationships (Knee et al., 2015). Eventually, realizing partners' flaws and doubting their compatibility as a couple, partners' relationship satisfaction decreases (Keizer, 2014). However, the outcome – relationship stability versus ending, depends on how both partners cope with relationship stress (Barnes et al., 2007), that is, how they deal with this type of cognitive dissonance.

At this point, one might wonder to what degree partners willingly direct their relationship outcomes and do they even have necessary resources, both emotional and behavioral, needed to appropriately respond to possible relationship stress (Doss et al., 2005), as opposed to thinking and functioning on automatic pilot. Answer might be found in mindfulness, a state of awareness that emerges through paying attention to one's own thoughts, emotions, and sensations, and experiencing them non-judgmentally in a present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness-

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related research in the field of romantic relationships has become more popular, with researchers finding numerous benefits of this phenomena to relationship satisfaction (Karremans et al., 2017; Kozlowski, 2013), especially in the context of couples therapy (Carson et al., 2004; Doss et al., 2005). However, little is known of possible mindfulness effects on cognitive processes that underlie relationship dynamic. Relatively unexplored field of relationship cognition concerns possible mindfulness effects on automatic thinking that directs partner interaction, such as positive illusions. Furthermore, relationship cognition-mindfulness-focused research still lacks dyadic perspective that would provide broader insight of partners' interdependence and relationship dynamic.

### Positive illusions

Positive illusions represent relatively permanent types of cognitive bias (Martz et al., 1998). The purpose of this biased perception is best understood through the analogy of defense mechanism. Stressful relationship events, such as perceiving partners' flaws and less desired behavior, often represent a threat to relationship stability. To maintain intimate relationships, and prevent possible negative outcomes, partners tend to mask negative aspects of their relationship, thus creating overly positive image of their significant other (Murray et al., 2003; Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011). This trend of positive polarization when evaluating intimate partner and relationship quality is becoming more prominent, and up to 80% of people tend to idealize their current intimate partner (Fowers et al., 2002).

Although often considered as negative and idealized perceptive bias (Murray et al., 1996b), researchers had found positive effects of positive illusions to numerous aspects of intimate relationship, such as supporting feelings of devotion and security (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011). On a dyadic level, positive illusions of both actor and partner positively contribute to decrease of relationship conflict and promotion of relationship satisfaction (Furler et al., 2014; Murray et al., 1996a). Murray et al. (2003) suggests that, with time, dyad members show tendency to strive toward those qualities that their partner did, but they initially had not perceive in themselves. Thus, discrepancy between actors' perception of intimate partner, and partners' self-assessment decreases with relationship duration, suggesting that

partners strive for achieving a more positive self-image (Murray et al., 2003). Although considered a less optimal coping strategy with cognitive dissonance, positive illusions positively contribute to relationship satisfaction and insure long-term relationship stability (Karremans et al., 2017).

### Dispositional mindfulness in romantic relationships

Mindfulness, in the context of relationship cognition, implies directing and focusing attention on thoughts and feelings that can directly or indirectly affect the stability of one's intimate relationship and can possibly disrupt partner dynamic (Karremans et al., 2017). Dispositional mindfulness positively predicts less anxiety and aggression directed behavior between partners after a conflict and is positively correlated with women's feelings of support and respect toward their partner (Barnes et al., 2007). Barnes et al. (2007) showed that male partners, whose female partners expressed higher levels of dispositional mindfulness, reported feeling less angry and hostile during relationship conflict, thus indicating possible interdependence model of mindfulness between partners, suggesting of mindfulness, being a possible protective factor of relationship stability (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Direct and positive effects of dispositional mindfulness on relationship satisfaction, partner behavior and emotions that direct partner dynamic, are relatively stable and had been found in numerous research (Adair et al., 2018; Barnes et al., 2007). Theorists argue that underlying mindfulness processes allow us to respond to external stimuli more objectively and have more clarity about own internal processes (Brown & Ryan, 2003) which is in accordance with beneficial mindfulness effects to numerous relationship outcomes when facing relationship stress (Karremans et al., 2017).

However, positive illusions do not represent a threat to relationship stability, but rather promote partners' relationship satisfaction. Although seen as a negative coping strategy, positive illusions represent the part of automatic thinking continuum that positively contributes to relationship satisfaction (Furler et al., 2014). Contrary, mindfulness, being a more conscious aspect of own thoughts and emotional reactions, and possibly partner's negative attributes and behavior,

represents an opposite to automatic pilot (Karremans et al, 2017), and might redirect relationship dynamic.

## Present study

Shifting research perspective from individual assessment to dyadic is especially important when exploring the field of partner dynamic and romantic relationship, while both partners' attributes and interaction are interdependent within dyad, suggesting that partners within dyad share more similar characteristics than they have with other people involved in romantic relationships (Kenny et al, 2006, as cited in Kaizer, 2014). While no known research has been done assessing mindfulness effects on positive illusions on the dyadic level of analysis, our study investigates possible mindfulness effects on partners' cognitive bias. The main objective is to examine whether, and in what direction, dispositional mindfulness contributes to persons' own positive illusions about their significant other (actor effect), as well as on the existence of partners' positive illusions (partner effect). It is hypothesized that dispositional level of women's mindfulness significantly negatively contributes to both positive illusions she holds about her own partner and partner's positive illusions. The same is hypothesized for men – higher dispositional level of men's mindfulness will decrease his own positive illusions, and positive illusions his female partner might hold about him.

## Method

### Sample

Participants from Croatia were recruited by snow-ball method, according to participation criteria that were following: minimum relationship duration of 6 months; not married and/or cohabiting and/or having children. Inclusion criteria were based on prior knowledge of romantic relationship dynamic (Miller et al, 2006; Murray et. al, 1996a) that differs significantly between married couples (with children) and cohabitating partners. Furthermore, minimum relationship duration criterion was set to include merely couples that, in the time, were in a more serious stage of their intimate relationship where initial infatuation had passed, and partners

were more familiar with each other's flaws and virtues. In total, 106 heterosexual couples, aged from 18 to 38 years, took part in the research. Mean age for women was 23.17 years ( $SD = 2.95$ ) and for men 24.54 ( $SD = 3.28$ ). Majority of women in our sample had bachelor's degree (49.1%), 25.5% had finished high-school, 24.5% had master's degree, and 1 female participant has finished elementary school. Most of men (36.8%) had finished high-school, 32.1% had bachelor's and 28.3% master's degree, 1.9% had finished postgraduate studies, and 1 male participant had finished only elementary school. The average length of the relationship was 3 years.

## Procedure

Data were collected in January 2020 via online questionnaire, within a larger survey on romantic relationship cognition conducted for the purpose of the graduation thesis of one of the authors of this article. According to the internal procedures, research was approved by the expert council of the Department of Psychology at the Catholic University of Croatia. Prior to participation, each dyad member was given a 5-digit code (e.g., M2156 & Z2156), that allowed us to differentiate dyad partners by gender. Participants were informed of research aim, procedure, right to withdraw from participating and were assured that their answers would remain anonymous.

## Measures

### *Dispositional mindfulness*

*Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale – MAAS* (Brown & Ryan, 2003) was used as a measure of dispositional mindfulness. On Likert type ( $1 = almost\ always$  to  $6 = almost\ never$ ) 15-item scale participants had to assess to what degree they encounter these sensations and experiences (e.g., "*I find myself doing things without paying attention*"). All items are to be recoded, prior to calculating linear combination of all the items, so the overall higher result reflects higher dispositional mindfulness. Factor structure of Croatian version of MAAS is identical to the original unidimensional structure found by Brown & Ryan (2003), with Cronbach alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = .85$ ) indicating satisfactory scale reliability.

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### *Positive illusions*

*Interpersonal Qualities Scale* (Murray et al., 1996a) was used as a measure of partners' positive illusions. The original scale consists of 23 interpersonal attributes – virtues, flaws and socially acceptable attributes that are driven from the larger pool of interpersonal attributes (Murray et al., 1996a). For this research, original attributes were double blinded translated to Croatian and tested for their comprehensibility. Final version of *Croatian Interpersonal Qualities Scale* consisted of 21 positive attributes (e.g. kind, patient) and negative (e.g. lazy, impulsive) attributes. Participants had to rate how well these attributes described themselves and their partner on a 9-point scale (*1 = not at all characteristic to 9 = completely characteristic*). According to researchers in this field (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011; Murray et al., 1996b) there are a few possible statistical calculations of positive illusions. However, residual score, that is believed to be a more reliable measure of positive illusions (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011; Murray et al., 2003), was given priority over difference score. Thus, illusion of partners' attributes was formed as a residual score between participants' perception of partner characteristics (*actor perception*) and partners' self-assessment (*partner reality*) that are believed to be some level of objective benchmark. Residual score indicates that some amount of illusory perception exists when perceiving intimate partner, while partner does not perceive these qualities when thinking about self (Murray et al., 1996b). A positive score indicates existence of illusory perception, while negative result implies objective or even negative perception of partner in comparison to partners' self-assessment.

### *Socio-demographic variables*

The questionnaire included demographic variables such as age, gender, duration, and nature of relationship. Along with questions regarding experience with meditation/mindfulness practice, participation criteria questions were also included.

### Data analysis

Partner's characteristics and attributes can affect not only their own perception of intimate relationship but can also impact their partner's perception of the relationship. While most research on romantic relationships includes variables



and constructs that are characteristic for one specific relationship, and are rather interdependent for both dyad members, we can no longer validly measure partners' attributes as independent entities (Kenny & Cook, 1999). The most popular dyadic model – Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), enables us to statistically consider partners' non-independence and to determine not only how one's result on independent variable affects his/her own outcome (result in dependent variable), but also what effect one's result on the independent variable has on their partner's outcome. In other words, we can assess actor effect, which is shown using horizontal lines in the model, and partner effect which is represented by diagonal lines (Figure 1). In our model shown in Figure 1, predictor (independent variable) was dispositional mindfulness and curved arrow between men's and women's result allows partners' results to be correlated. Positive illusions were dependent variable. Circles marked with E and E' indicate that residual results covary between dyad members due to a cause that was not measured by the conducted research and point to the interdependence of dyad members. To test hypothesized relationships, we have used structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in R (lavaan) program.

## Results

Since preliminary analysis did not establish the existence of outliers (according to Mahalanobis distance), all the 106 dyads were included in dyadic analysis. Women and men showed about the same, relatively high level of dispositional mindfulness (Table 1). Descriptive results indicate that partners differ in how they perceive one another. While women tend to have positive illusions about men, men in our sample do not show the same for their partners. Therefore, in average, women perceive their partners more positively than their partners perceive themselves. However, men seem to have mostly negative perception about women, so they estimate their partner's attributes in a more negative light than she perceives herself.

**Table 1**

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations in the APIM model

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Dispositional mindfulness_W	4.01	0.75	2.00	5.33	1	-.043	.128	.240*
2. Positive illusions_W	- 0.19	0.54	1.21	1.47		1	.314**	-.155
3. Dispositional mindfulness_M	4.06	0.76	1.80	5.60			1	.252**
4. Positive illusions_M	-0.19	0.70	1.85	1.23				1

Notes. W – women; M – men. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Dispositional mindfulness and positive illusions are positively correlated within dyad members. Positive correlation has been found between one partner’s mindfulness and other partner’s positive illusions, respectively for both partners. Effect between men’s mindfulness and women’s positive illusions suggests that the more mindful men are, their partners tend to perceive their attributes in a more positive, rather illusory light. The same effect has been shown for women - the more mindful women are, the more positive illusions men have about them. Accordingly, the same pattern is found on individual level, but only for men. The more mindful men were, more positively they perceived their partners.

**Table 2**

Unstandardized estimates of actor and partner effects in APIM model

	Effect	Estimate	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Dispositional mindfulness (M) - Positive illusions (M)	actor effect (M)	0.206*	0.084	.014
Dispositional mindfulness (W) - Positive illusions (W)	actor effect (W)	-0.062	0.067	.8
Dispositional mindfulness (W) - Positive illusions (M)	partner effect (M)	0.197*	0.077	.011
Dispositional mindfulness (M) - Positive illusions (W)	partner effect (W)	0.231**	0.063	.0

Notes. W – women; M – men. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

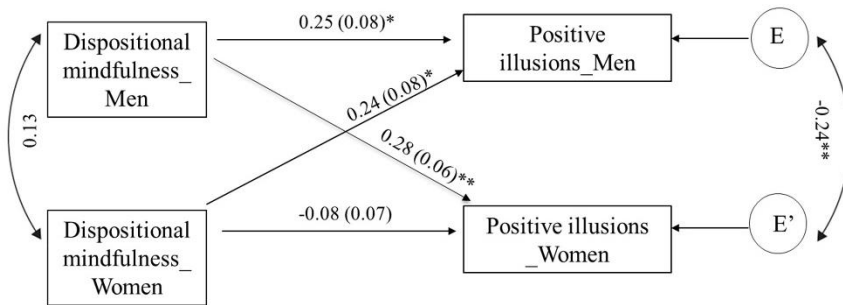


Figure 1. APIM model with standardized estimates

Actor-Partner Interdependence Model showed significant actor effect for men, suggesting that more mindful men have more positive illusions about their partner (Table 2 and Figure 1). Furthermore, both partner effects proved to be significant – men's mindfulness positively contributes to women's positive illusions and same pattern is true for women – the more mindful women are, the more positive illusions their partner has about them.

### Dyadic patterns: parameter $k$

To statistically determine dyadic pattern in the results, Kenny and Ledermann (2010) suggest calculating parameter  $k$  which is ratio of partner and actor effect and should be calculated only when standardized actor effects in model are greater than .10 and are statistically significant (which is case in our model). In our model,  $k$  for the women equals -3.76, and for the men 0.95 (Stas et al., 2018). For the women, 95% percentile confidence interval ranges from -37.33 to 32.85. For men, confidence interval ranges from 0.12 and 4.46 (Stas et al., 2018).

## Discussion

### Differences in Positive illusions

Interestingly, our partners differentiate when thinking about their partner. While women have positive illusions about their partners, men perceive their partners more negatively, or one might argue even more objectively, in

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comparison to partners' self-assessment (see Table 1). While residual score is calculated as difference between one's perception of their partner's attributes and partners' self-assessment on those same attributes, negative illusions that men have about women could be result of a more favorable women's self-assessment. Steenkamp et al. (2010) argue that women are more prone to give socially desirable responses on items that assess affiliation, belonging, intimacy, love, approval, and nurturance. Many personal attributes that our participants were asked to assess belong to that category. Paulhus and John (1998) called this tendency moralistic response and research consistently shows that women have higher moralistic response tendencies than men (Heine & Lehman, 1995; Lalwani, et al., 2006). These results indicate that, despite of men's tendencies to perceive their partners in a less positive, rather objective, light, our couples are prone to illusory perception of intimate partner characteristics that is believed to further relationship satisfaction (Miller et al., 2006; Murray et al., 1996a, 2003). While interpreting this result, it is important to remind that couples have been in romantic relationship for a longer period (3 years, on average). By that we can conclude that, women's tendencies to (overly) positively attribute intimate partner and perceive them through pink-colored glasses is preserving even in the mature stage of the relationship when knowledge of intimate partners' attributes and behavior is expected to be relatively objective (Miller et al., 2006). However, it seems that our women fall within that 80% statistic of people that overestimate their intimate partner and romantic relationship, which only supports previous findings (Murray et al., 1996a). This surely questions how well partners know one another, and if is justified to assume that illusory perception functions to promote feelings of security and commitment for possibly the most important intimate relationship that we achieve in adult age?

### Actor and partner effects of dispositional mindfulness on positive illusions

On grounds of the assumption that mindfulness and positive illusions are based on opposite underlying cognitive processes, we hypothesized that dispositional mindfulness might shift partner perception from automatic pilot to

more conscious functioning, thus contributing more negatively to positive illusions. However, our results indicate the contrary. One's higher level of mindfulness seems to be positively correlated with other partner's illusory perception. Positive and significant partner effects of dispositional mindfulness to positive illusions indicate that women's mindfulness only supports overly illusory perception among men, and the same is true for men. Murray et al. (1996a; 1996b) state that this cognitive bias only further supports implicit belief of "blind love", by thus positively contributing to relationship satisfaction. This leads to questioning how truly intimate partners know each other, that is how prominent is this illusory effect of automatic thinking over our objective perception?

Based on interdependence theory, Kenny and Cook (1999) have established four different patterns that could be determined using dyadic analysis: only actor, only partner, couple pattern and social comparison, or contrast pattern (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010). The dyadic pattern is established based on 95% confidence interval of the parameter  $k$  that is calculated using bootstrapping method because of the non-normal distribution of parameter. In our model confidence interval for women is very wide and includes -1, 0 and 1, so we can't determine which dyadic pattern is most likely. For men, confidence interval includes 1, so we conclude that couple pattern fits these data the most. To be more precise, couple patterns occur when actor and partner effects are equal ( $a = p$ ;  $k = 1$ ), that is when one person's result on dependent variable (in our case, positive illusions), the same effect has their own as well as their partner's score on causal variable (dispositional mindfulness, in our model) (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010). Specifically, in our sample, men's dispositional mindfulness, and women's dispositional mindfulness both have equally significant positive effect on men's positive illusions.

It appears that cognitive schemas are relatively fixed and, working on automatic level of thinking, represent more prominent cognitive shortcuts opposed to mindful perceiving and directed attention. Thus, mindfulness in our participants did not negatively affect neither their own, nor partner's positive illusions. Another explanation of these findings lies within cognitive willpower that is needed for two opposed cognitive processes, where automatic thinking

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develops on its own, while mindful awareness demands more focused and directed consciousness (Brown et al., 2007). Therefore, being mindful did not affect the persistence of cognitive bias of illusory perception, but is rather positively related to perceiving own partner in a more positive light. It might be argued that this underlying automatic thinking is relatively permanent due to partners' need to positively resolve cognitive dissonance that appears with low congruency of partners' current and believed attributes. Therefore, as Karremans et al. (2017) suggest, partners' first urge is to ensure relationship stability and are automatically motivated to do so. In context of the proposed assumption, mindfulness might even represent a risk factor to relationship stability among couples that have low emotional and coping resources (Doss & Christensen, 2006).

Even though our hypothesis did not emerge to be true, results are in accordance with Boatright and McIntosh (2008) research that suggests positive correlation of mindfulness and positive illusions about self, indicating that, more mindful individuals are more likely to have overly positive perception. Explanation of these findings might also lie within the construct of mindfulness. While being mindful allows us to non-judgmentally observe experience and sensations in the present moment, it might be argued that processes beneficial to own well-being, in this context relationship stability and satisfaction, are beyond mindful awareness, or just beyond uncultivated mindful awareness. Theorists argue that underlying mindfulness processes allow us to respond to external stimuli more objectively (Brown & Ryan, 2003) which largely benefits in the context of threatening stimuli which positive illusions do not represent.

### Contributions, limitations, and implications

The novelty of our study lies within the dyadic approach to assessing mindfulness and relationship cognition. This shift in methodology is still insufficiently embraced, but necessary for broader understanding of the field of relationship cognition and its role in partners' dynamic. Understanding relationship cognition and mindfulness mechanisms that could have significant effect on recognition of maladaptive behavior that threatens relationship quality

(Kappen et al., 2018; Karremans et al., 2017), provides knowledge for practical implications beneficial to practitioners that work with couples in troubled relationships who have little emotional and cognitive resources to deal with relationship stress. Due to auto selection, our participants were on average highly satisfied with their relationship, which limits our findings. Thus, it would be of great interest to include less satisfied and troubled couples when assessing mindfulness effects on relationship cognition, especially combining dyadic perspective with experimental approach. Furthermore, as the field of mindfulness research in the context of relationship cognition is expanding, some authors (Kimmes et al., 2018) differentiate relationship mindfulness from dispositional mindfulness and new aspects of assessing mindfulness are considered. While our research assessed only trait mindfulness that both partners bring in interaction, further research of these constructs and their relationship, especially seen from different methodological and theoretical perspectives, is welcomed.

More research on underlying mindfulness mechanisms and automatic thinking is needed. Thus, it would be interesting to examine a more comprehensive mediation model of mindfulness and positive illusions on relationship satisfaction, to investigate how two constructs affect relationship dynamic and whether they promote partners' satisfaction. Though our research only focused to investigate direct relationship between dispositional mindfulness and positive illusions, it might be interesting to research possible mediation models of two constructs with motivation to maintain the relationship and other emotional aspects that affect relationship satisfaction. Moreover, while dispositional levels of mindfulness did not have expected negative effects on illusory perception, it might be interesting to examine whether cultivated mindfulness might redirect partners' perception, especially considering possible partner effects. Finally, positive illusions represent one possible strategy for dealing with cognitive dissonance, with partner acceptance being the other. Consciousness of own emotional reactions when perceiving partner's flaws is in the basis of partner acceptance (Doss et al., 2005), indicating of possible similar mechanisms that underly mindfulness and even questioning

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whether mindfulness might lie in greater partner acceptance. Thus, further investigating the interaction of these two constructs would be of great interest.

### *Conflict of interest*

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

### *Data availability statement*

Available upon request. For further details on data contact the authors.

### *Authors Note*

The sample presented in this research was used for the purpose of other analyses of relationship cognition.

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