Summary
Implicit Processes in Close Relationships:
Implicit Partner Attitudes and Relationship Outcomes

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Close relationships have a very important place in human life, socializing with others and feeling belongingness are amongst our most fundamental psychological needs (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Romantic relationships are especially important in adult life, many people cite being in a happy romantic relationship as an important life goal (Roberts & Robins, 2000). While being in a satisfying romantic relationship has been associated with many positive outcomes, such as happiness and subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Easterlin, 2003), health and longevity (e.g., House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014); stress in close relationships predict serious problems, such as loneliness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) and depression (Beach, Sandeen, O'Leary, & Barlow, 1990). Owing to this centrality of close relationships in human life, a growing number of studies investigate the topic, constantly expanding the literature (for a review, see Reis, Aron, Clark, & Finkel, 2013).

Similar to other fields of psychology, the majority of these studies employ self-report measures (e.g., surveys, interviews). A major limitation of these measures is the fact that they rely only on the account of the participants and hence are susceptible to be confounded with the risk of participants not being entirely open and honest in their answers due to social desirability concerns (Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983; Orne, 1962). Another limitation of self-report measures is the fact that they miss the implicit processes that take part outside of conscious awareness and hence are unavailable to be reported by the participants even if they do want to report them (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Petty, Fazio, & Brinol, 2009). Building on the Motivation and Opportunity as Determinants Model (MODE) of Fazio (1990), which argues that people's implicit evaluations are better predictors of their behaviors when their motivation and/or capacity are low for impulse control, it can be argued that close relationships is an area of life where implicit processes play

an important role, as the motivation and ego-resources for constant control of the automatic responses are likely to be depleted in the long-run in the relationship context (see Buck & Neff, 2012; Bushman, DeWall, Pond, & Hanus, 2014). With these considerations in mind, more and more studies have started using implicit measures in relationship science over the past years (for reviews, see Andersen, Saribay, & Przybylinski, 2012; Baldwin, Lydon, McClure, & Etchison, 2010). The aim of the present review is to briefly introduce implicit measures that are used in the close relationships field and to review the studies that investigate the links between implicit partner attitudes and key relationship outcomes.

Implicit Partner Attitudes and Measures

Implicit measures are those evaluation tools where the participants' uncontrolled automatic responses are recorded, so that the attitudes that are formed by implicit processes that lie outside of conscious awareness can be tapped into (for reviews see, Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In relationship science, implicit partner evaluations have been conceptualized as the spontaneous positive or negative affect associated with the partner or partner-related symbols (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), and the overall implicit associations in one's mind about the partner (DeHart, Pelham, & Murray, 2004). Based on this conceptualization, implicit partner evaluations have been commonly tested via the reaction times participants display for partner-related and unrelated stimuli and the interference they experience when these stimuli are presented in positive and negative contexts. The various implicit measures that follow this line of logic have shown that implicit positive evaluations towards partners are easier to make than negative ones (e.g., Banse, 1999; Zayas, 2003; Zayas & Shoda, 2005), yet this effect is moderated by positive or negative relationship events (e.g., Banse & Kowalick, 2007; Murray, Holmes, & Pinkus, 2010).

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One of the most common implicit partner attitude measures is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998). The IAT is a reaction time measure which assesses the degree to which different concepts are differentially associated with positive or negative evaluations in the mind by asking the participants to engage in a series of categorization tasks, where partner related stimuli are paired with the category of either good or bad. Another measure that aims to capture the implicit processes in close relationships is the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) developed by Payne, Cheng, Govorun, and Stewart (2005). The AMP is a test that measures the extent to which the positive affect generated by being exposed to a pleasant stimulus (e.g., partner picture) is attributed to a succeeding stimulus and causes a more favorable evaluation of it, as an indicator of the implicit positivity associated with the first stimulus (i.e., the attitude object). The Name-Letter Task (NLT), developed by Nuttin (1985), is another implicit measure which asks the participants to rate the extent to which they like a randomly presented letter of the alphabet. Past studies have shown that evaluating the initials of one's name more favorably as compared to other letters is a measurement of implicit high self-esteem (Nuttin, 1985). DeHart and colleagues (2004) and LeBel and Campbell (2009, 2013) developed the Partner-Name-Letter Task (PNLT) by adapting this test to partner names and showed that the preference people have for their partners' initials is a measure of their implicit evaluations for them as well.

Implicit Partner Attitudes and Critical Relationship Factors and Outcomes

Numerous studies have shown that implicit partner attitudes and several relationship factors and outcomes are significantly related. The common theme of these studies is that positive implicit partner attitudes predict positive relationship outcomes.

One key factor in relationships is attachment orientations, which reflect the mental representation of significant others based on the quality of the interactions with them. Consistent with the literate on attachment, a positive relationship between secure attachment and positive implicit partner attitudes has been identified (Banse & Kowalick, 2007; Zayas & Shoda, 2005). A key relationship outcome, satisfaction, which predicts the quality and longevity of a relationship, has also been associated with implicit partner attitudes. More favorable automatic partner evaluations have been associated with higher satisfaction in both cross sectional (LeBel & Campbell, 2009) and longitudinal studies (McNulty, Olson, Meltzer, & Shaffer, 2013; Scinta & Gable, 2007). Considering the

key role of satisfaction in predicting subsequent relationship outcomes, it is quite sensical that positive implicit partner attitudes also predict reporting fewer problems in the relationship (McNulty et al., 2013) and lower chances of breaking up (LeBel & Campbell, 2009; Lee, Rogge, & Reis, 2010; Zayas & Shoda, 2005) in the future.

Implicit partner attitudes have been associated with several other key relationship outcomes in addition to satisfaction. Zayas and Shoda (2005) have shown that positive implicit partner attitudes predict higher commitment to and higher positive expectations from the relationship. Individuals with more positive implicit partner attitudes also report they are more willing to depend on their partners in risky situations (Murray et al., 2011) and engage in more constructive relationship behaviors (Faure, Righetti, Seibel, & Hofmann, 2018; LeBel & Campbell, 2013). Automatic evaluations about one's partner also track sexual experiences within the relationship. Individuals with more positive implicit partner attitudes report both higher frequency of sexual activity (Hicks, McNulty, Meltzer, & Olson, 2016) and higher number of orgasms during those sexual encounters (Hicks, McNulty, Meltzer, & Olson, 2018).

In addition to these cross-sectional studies that have established the links between implicit partner attitudes and key relationship outcomes, experimental studies have investigated the effects of these automatic evaluations on the outcomes. In experiments where the automatic associations regarding partners were manipulated via pairing partner-related symbols with either positive or neutral stimuli, those participants whose implicit partner attitudes were enhanced by the priming reported they felt closer to their partners and trusted their partners more (Murray et al., 2011). This experimentally induced implicit attitude enhancement also caused higher relationship satisfaction measured eight weeks later (McNulty, Olson, Jones, & Acosta (2017).

Discussion

As briefly reviewed above, implicit measures are very crucial and increasingly popular tools for studying close relationships. The growing number of studies reveal that implicit partner attitudes are related to several key relationship outcomes. Yet, the associations between these implicit measures and the traditional explicit measures have been the subject of a long-standing debate in the literature (see Fazio & Olson, 2003), and this debate is ongoing in the field of close relationships as well. Even though there are studies that report consistency between the two types of measurement (e.g., Banse & Kowalick, 2007; LeBel & Campbell, 2013), there are also studies that fail to report significant correlations

between them (for a meta-analysis, see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). In addition to this uncertainty about the consistency between explicit and implicit measures, the fact that there are many different implicit measures and that these measures show great variance in their internal reliability (see Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000) presents the question of which implicit measures are the more reliable ones. Currently, there are no studies that comprehensively cover all the major implicit measures used in relationship science and systematically compare them. A comparative analysis of the major implicit measures in terms of psychometric properties and predictive power for future relationship outcomes would be a welcome addition to the field.

Another issue in the measurement of implicit partner attitudes stems from the fact that past work has typically used measures that assume that IPEs are conceptualized on a single continuum with positive on one end and negative on the other (e.g., Banse & Kowalick, 2007; McNulty et al., 2013; Scinta & Gable, 2007). Yet, a defining feature of mental representations of significant others is their affective complexity (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Andersen & Chen, 2002), reflecting having experienced both favorable and unfavorable experiences with significant others (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Indeed, recent work has shown that implicit evaluations about significant others are highly positive, but also contain some negativity; that is, significant others trigger positive and negative implicit evaluations simultaneously (Zayas & Shoda, 2015). Future studies employing measures that tap into both positive and negative implicit partner attitudes could be fruitful in capturing a comprehensive picture of the implicit processes that govern close relationships.

One other future research avenue is investigating how fast implicit partner attitudes are updated based on new experiences with partners and if more or less recent experiences play a more important role in this update. Early theories of implicit attitudes argued that implicit evaluations change harder as compared to explicit evaluations, and hence are less susceptible to new experiences (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Yet, recent evidence suggests that implicit attitudes are sensitive to even one piece of counter-attitudinal information and can be updated accordingly (Cone, Mann, & Ferguson, 2017). It is conceivable that implicit attitudes towards partners are also subject to change as a function of both past and recent interactions with the significant others.

All these open research questions and the existing findings make the importance of uncovering the implicit processes in close relationships and including implicit partner attitude measures in future studies clear. It can be quite beneficial to regard implicit processes as a fundamental component of research in better understanding close relationships, which constitute an essential part of human experience.