Integrating automatic processes into theories of relationships

James K McNulty[1] and Michael A Olson[2]

Dual-process models can inform the three influential theories of relationships highlighted by this volume. We focus specifically on how the automatic/implicit processes described by the MODE model can illuminate how satisfying relationships so frequently become unsatisfying despite people's strong motivations to protect desirable beliefs. Our review suggests that: automatic partner evaluations are less susceptible to motivated biases and thus may better track relational rewards and costs and predict explicit evaluations as suggested by interdependence perspectives; implicit measures should better capture evolved partner preferences and thus should provide stronger support for evolutionary perspectives; and implicit measures more accurately capture the automaticity of the attachment system and thus may provide stronger tests of predictions derived from attachment theory.

Addresses
[1] Florida State University, Department of Psychology, 1107 W. Call St., Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States
[2] University of Tennessee, Department of Psychology, 1404 Circle Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996, United States

Corresponding author: McNulty, James K (mcnulty@psy.fsu.edu)

Research in the tradition of the three theoretical perspectives highlighted by this issue (interdependence theory, evolutionary perspectives, and attachment theory) has relied largely on explicit self-reports to measure the constructs specified by those theories. Yet, research outside the domain of close relationships has incorporated automatic cognitive processes not always captured by such reports into models of social processes [1]. We argue that integrating these dual process perspectives into theories of relationships will provide a better understanding of close relationships.

All three theoretical perspectives highlighted in this volume emphasize the importance of *perceptions* and *behaviors* to close relationships [2]. Fazio's MODE model

[3••] is particularly well-suited to demonstrate the importance of dual-process conceptualizations for understanding both. According the MODE model, *M*otivation and *O*pportunity *De*termine whether attitudes guide perceptions and behaviors spontaneously, or more deliberately. The starting point for any judgment or behavior is the attitude that is automatically activated upon perception of the attitude-object (e.g., one's partner). If such automatic attitudes are strong, as automatic evaluations of a romantic partner are likely to be, and if motivation or opportunity to behave and think otherwise is low, automatic attitudes guide responding; that is, they orient attention toward the object, influence construal of the situation in attitude-consistent ways, and ready responses that lead to attitude consistent behaviors and judgments. Given sufficient motivation and opportunity to respond otherwise, however, a more deliberate decision-making process ensues, in which people consider the costs and benefits of particular courses of action before rendering judgment or enacting behavior.

In the remainder of this article, we review recent work on implicit social cognition in romantic relationships to highlight the benefits of incorporating these basic tenets of the MODE model into all three major theories of relationships. We approach this endeavor with the goal of shedding light on a theoretically puzzling question: why do romantic relationships so frequently transform from satisfying to unsatisfying? On the one hand, we know that people possess numerous effective cognitive strategies for maintaining beliefs that are important to them [4]. Indeed, self-perceptions, political attitudes, and prejudice are all fairly impervious to change. But on the other hand, in stark contrast to such stability, romantic relationship beliefs are frequently anything but stable. Not only do almost 50% of U.S. marriages end in divorce [5], even the large majority of spouses in relationships that remain intact experience declines in satisfaction [6•]. We argue that considering implicit social cognition in the context of each major theory of relationships offers insight into these theoretically perplexing changes.

Implicit social cognition and interdependence theory

Interdependence theory [7,8] posits that intimates' derive evaluations of their relationships from their perceptions of their rewarding versus costly experiences. All else being equal (i.e., ignoring the role of preferences for now), reward/cost ratios determine evaluations of the relationships. Of course, people experience numerous relationship rewards and costs, making the determination of the ratio ambiguous and, hence, susceptible to motivated

Figure 1
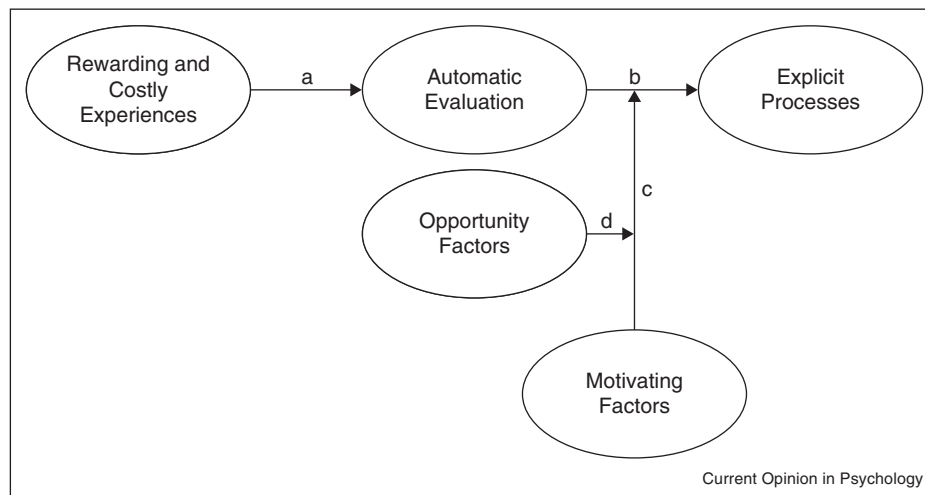
Integrating MODE principles into interdependence theory.

reasoning [9]. Indeed, most people are positively biased regarding perceptions of their partners' qualities [10,11]. In other words, at any given time, motivated reasoning can create a disconnect between intimates' relationship experiences and their explicit evaluations of those experiences.

Nevertheless, although such positive biases can help sustain satisfaction over time [12], most romantic relationships either end or become less satisfying. Why do such biased perceptions not last? We contend that the MODE model can be used to understand such change. Whereas deliberative responses, such as explicit reports of relationship satisfaction, are susceptible to the biasing effects of motivations, such as the desire to see one's partner in a positive light, automatic evaluations upon which those deliberative processes frequently rest are less affected by such motivations. Indeed, attitude formation and change research indicates that people automatically — without awareness or intention — learn associations between valued events and contiguous objects in ways that manifest as automatic evaluations of those objects [13,14]. In fact, people's implicit tallying of positive and negative associations to objects appears to be more accurate than their explicit tallying, particularly as the information set increases in size [15,16]. In other words, people's automatically-activated attitudes may more accurately reflect the accumulated experience of positive and negative outcomes associated with an object than their more deliberately-derived attitudes. In the context of a close relationship, then, intimates' automatic relationship evaluations should be more responsive to the rewards and costs that accumulate over the course of their relationship. Although the motivation to perceive the relationship positively may help intimates' defend their explicit evaluations against any negative automatic evaluations

when they have the opportunity (e.g., cognitive resources) to do so, the MODE model posits that such motives are rendered impotent in the absence of opportunity. Over the course of any long-term relationship, there are inevitable times of stress [17] that will deplete resources [18,19] and thereby allow negative automatic attitudes to directly affect deliberate, explicit evaluations and behaviors.

A path diagram applying this MODE framework to interdependence theory appears in Figure 1. As represented by path a, rewarding and costly experiences directly influence intimates' automatic evaluations of the relationship. As represented by path b, these automatic evaluations guide more deliberate interpersonal processes, such as explicit relationship satisfaction and dissolution. As represented by path c, however, this process can be moderated by intimates' motivation to see the relationship in a positive light, which can lead to a disconnect between intimates' automatic and explicit evaluations. Crucially, though, as represented by path d, the extent to which motivations disrupt the connection between intimates' automatic and explicit evaluations depends on their opportunity to do so (e.g., stress/self-regulatory resources).

A growing body of research supports these predictions. Consistent with the idea that automatic evaluations are more sensitive to rewards and costs than are more explicit reports, Murray *et al.* [20] demonstrated that partners' behavioral tendencies toward each other, as indicated by a daily diary, predicted their automatic but not explicit evaluations of the relationship over four years. Likewise, McNulty *et al.* [21••] recently demonstrated that intimates implicit self-evaluations, which are partially responsible for constructive interpersonal behaviors [22], also predicted automatic but not explicit partner