



How love and lust change people's perception of relationship partners

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ABSTRACT

Because love is related to thoughts in the distant future and lust triggers thoughts related to the present, based on construal level theory, we propose a link between love and a global processing style as well as a link between lust and a local processing style. These processing styles should further expand to partnership evaluations, partially explaining halo phenomena. In Study 1, college students and senior participants were primed by either imagining a walk with a person they were in love with, or a one-night stand. In Study 2, love and lust were primed subliminally. In all studies, love priming enhanced global, holistic processing and halos, whereas lust priming enhanced local, detail oriented processing and reduced halos. Moreover, in Study 1, temporal distance mediated the effects. Implications for research of moods on processing styles, partner perception, and the distinction between love and lust are discussed.

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Introduction

In an ample set of studies, Liberman and Trope (1998) investigated the relation between temporal perspective and level of construal. Their construal level theory (CLT, Liberman & Trope, 2008; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007) predicts that distant events lead to abstract, global, and holistic processing whereas more proximal events lead to concrete, detail oriented, and local processing. Because, usually, less is known about events in the distant future, people think abstractly about them; whereas more proximal events are often more concrete in nature, allowing for a more detailed processing. As a result of the constant co-occurrence of temporarily distant events and abstractness, people may start habitually thinking in more holistic ways whenever they think about a more distant event, with the reverse being true for more proximal events. To illustrate, in one of their studies (Liberman & Trope, 1998), participants imagined themselves engaging in various activities (e.g., reading a science fiction book, taking an exam) either “tomorrow” or “next year” and described these activities. Consistent with CLT, it was found that participants used more abstract descriptions (e.g., “broadening horizons” versus “flipping pages”) in the distant future condition compared to the near future condition, and that the reverse was true for low-level descriptions. Recently, Liberman and Förster (in press) showed an influence of distant temporal priming on Gestalt-like,

global perception whereas proximal temporal priming enhanced perception of details of a stimulus set.

We want to apply CLT's logic to partner evaluation and suggest that love and lust differ with respect to temporal perspective (see Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and, consequently, affect processing styles differentially. With others, we define love as “wishes to self expand and caring for or identifying with a person, including feelings of infatuation and emotional bonding” and lust as the “wish, need, or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities, including feelings of sexual desire” (see Aron & Aron, 1986; Diamond, 2003; Regan & Berscheid, 1995; Rubin, 1970).

Romantic love is usually associated with attachment goals (Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and “foreverness”, the long term goal of commitment and sharing a life time together; lust, however, exists more in the “here and now” and does not necessarily involve a long-term perspective, which is for example reflected in the notion of a “one-night stand” (see Sprecher & Regan, 1998). We reason that these wishes, attitudes or theories about love and lust may be represented in memory and may trigger different processing styles. From social cognition research it is known that when people frequently and consistently experience certain ways of thinking in certain situations, subtle reminders of these situations are sufficient to trigger those procedures (see for example, Förster, Friedman, Butterbach, & Sassenberg, 2005; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Schooler, 2002; Shah 2003a, 2003b). Because of a strong association between a long-term perspective and the concept of love, subtle reminders of love should habitually engender a global way of

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processing information, whereas subtle cues of lust, should automatically initiate a local way of processing.

These basic processing styles may further influence the well-known halo effect in relationships. Research shows that love may lead to a positively biased, idealized perception of the romantic partner (e.g., Brickman, 1987; Hall & Taylor, 1976; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Swann, de la Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In general, the positivity phenomenon has been attributed to the halo effect, which describes a lack of differentiation among unrelated dimensions (Thorndike, 1920). Clearly, with its detail focus, a local processing style should support differentiation processes, whereas a global processing style might impair it. Recently, Förster (2009) found first evidence for a link between differentiation processes and perceptual processing styles: he primed global versus local perception and found a facilitation of similarity search upon global priming whereas after local priming dissimilarity search was enhanced. It is thus possible that a local processing style triggered by lust would enhance the differentiation between dimensions, whereas a global processing style would impair it.

Overview of the experiments

We primed situations of love, lust, and friendship or happiness supraliminally (via imagination instructions, Study 1) or subliminally (by priming concepts, Study 2) and compared those to a non-primed control group. Next, we administered the Navon (1977) task, asking participants to identify large or small letters (as described above) to measure differences in global versus local processing. Finally, a questionnaire was given to participants in which they were asked to evaluate their partners on several independent dimensions. We expected less (more) differentiation among dimensions when primed with love (lust). We assume this effect to be mediated by global versus local processing as measured by the Navon letter task. We included a friendship priming group in Study 1, and a happiness priming group in Study 2. Whereas friendships are related to long term goals, happiness is usually perceived as a short lived state (see Förster, *in press*). We expected that friendship primes would lead to effects similar to love while happiness primes would lead to effects more similar to lust. In Study 1 we also assessed temporal distance of imagined thoughts and predicted this to be a mediator of the relation between love/lust, global/local processing and halo.

Study 1

In order to test the generalizability of our account, we recruited both an undergraduate sample and an elderly sample. One may argue that people in later stages of life perceive their future time as more limited and are more selective when it comes to investing into close personal relationships than younger adults (Lang & Carstensen, 2002), therefore, the concept of foreverness might have a different meaning for different age groups. In addition, research shows age-related variations in the processing of positive information, which might influence the tendency to show a halo effect (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). Yet, provided that both older and younger generations associate love more than lust with long term goals and wishes, we do not predict any differences.

Method

Design and participants

The study took the form of a one-factorial design with the factors of priming (love versus lust versus friendship versus control) and Age Group (16–26 versus 60–85) realized between partici-

pants. The main dependent measures were global versus local processing measured with the Navon task (see Förster & Higgins, 2005), temporal distance of imagined thoughts, overall positivity rating of one's partner, and average deviation across items from the partner evaluation questionnaire.

One hundred sixty two people (47 women and 38 men, average age $M = 22$; $SD = 2.7$; and 40 males, 37 females; age $M = 66$; $SD = 4.11$) who were in a stable relationship (more than 1 year) were recruited to take part in a battery of unrelated psychological experiments for which they received 20 Euro. All participants had a college education and came from a roughly similar social background. Four participants had to be excluded from the analyses because they failed to answer questions in one of our questionnaires.

Materials

The priming task

We asked participants to do a task assessing their capacity to imagine pleasant emotional events, for which they would have 5 min. They were told that if they experienced the task as too emotionally involving or intimate, they could terminate it at any time without this affecting their compensation. They were asked to take notes. In the love priming group they were told to imagine a walk with their beloved partner and to try to feel how much they love him or her. In the lust priming group they were asked to imagine a situation of casual sex with a person they were attracted to but not in love with; just as in the love condition, they were asked to imagine the pleasure involved in this event. In the friendship group they were asked to imagine a walk with an old friend they liked a lot but had no romantic inclinations toward and to feel the pleasure involved in this event. In the control condition participants were instructed to imagine having a walk on their own. To make it less likely that participants in the lust priming group generated more behavior related thoughts than participants of the other experimental groups, all participants were asked to think about actions involved in the respective situations rather than thinking in terms of states. All participants were asked to think about a future rather than a past event in the most positive way.¹

Imagination questionnaire

Next, participants received a questionnaire probing for experienced difficulty of the imagination task, embarrassment, and liking of the task. Moreover, we used additional variables to learn more whether temporal distance or other factors involved in love and lust drive the effect. We asked participants whether their imagination differed in abstractness (How abstract or concrete is the story? On a scale from 1 = *very concrete* to 9 = *very abstract*); time perspective involved in the stories (When did the event take place? On a scale from -5 = *in the distant past*, 0 = *today*, and $+5$ = *in the distant future*); positivity (How positive or negative is the story? 1 = *very negative* to 9 = *very positive*); and whether it involved more behaviors or states (1 = *more behaviors*; 2 = *behaviors and states*; 3 = *more states*).

Mood questionnaire

We assessed the current mood of participants ("How do you feel right now?") on a scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 9 (*very good*). They were also asked how "happy", "worried", "scared", "relaxed", "nervous", "down", "disappointed", "joyful", "loving", "calm", "tense",

¹ The inductions were carefully pretested with respect to whether imagination would lead to differences in abstractness, time perspective, valence of content, and whether more actions than states were used. The only obtained group differences related to time perspective. Participants primed with love and friendship reported more wishes, goals or events that related to future events compared to participants primed with lust. Detailed pretest results can be acquired from the first author.

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