

# The role of dysfunctional relationship beliefs in relationship satisfaction

A comparison of singles with satisfied and less satisfied coupled people in their endorsement of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs

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**Abstract – Introduction.** The present study aimed to assess the role of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs in relationship satisfaction. The second aim was to compare singles to satisfied and less satisfied coupled subjects, in their endorsement of these dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Finally, gender differences and the influence of age in the endorsement of these dysfunctional beliefs were examined. **Methods.** A sample of single, satisfied and less satisfied subjects (N = 930) completed questionnaire measures of relationship satisfaction (in case of being in a relationship), irrational and anxious relationship beliefs. **Results.** Results suggest that greater endorsement of the dysfunctional beliefs 'Disagreement is destructive', 'Partners cannot change', 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of exposure' relate to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Significant differences were found between satisfied coupled subjects' and singles' endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. When compared to less satisfied coupled subjects, significant differences were only found on the subscales 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of abandonment'. In this regard, only few significant gender differences were found and age seemed to be of little relevance. **Conclusion.** Results only partially supported the first hypothesis. With regard to the comparison of singles with coupled subjects, results suggested that singles and less satisfied coupled subjects express stronger endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs than satisfied coupled subjects. Overall, gender and age could not account for differences in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs.

**Nederlandse samenvatting (Dutch abstract) – Inleiding.** Het doel van de huidige studie was de rol van irrationele en angstige relatie opvattingen in relatie tevredenheid te toetsen. Daarnaast werden drie groepen vergeleken in de mate van geloof in deze disfunctionele relatie opvattingen; singles, tevreden en minder tevreden mensen in een romantische relatie. Tot slot werd de invloed van sekse- en leeftijd op geloof in deze opvattingen onderzocht. **Methoden.** Een steekproef bestaande uit singles, tevreden mensen in een relatie en minder tevreden mensen in een relatie (N = 930), heeft een vragenlijst beantwoord over relatietevredenheid (indien van toepassing), irrationele en angstige relatie opvattingen. **Resultaten.** Sterker geloof in de opvattingen 'Onenigheid is vernietigend', 'Een partner kan niet veranderen', 'Angst voor samensmelting' en 'Angst voor verlating' toonde een verband met een lagere relatietevredenheid. Significante verschillen gevonden voor geloof in de meeste disfunctionele opvattingen tussen tevreden mensen in een relatie en singles. De vergelijking van singles met minder tevreden mensen in een relatie, toonde alleen significante verschillen op de subschalen 'Angst voor samensmelting' en 'Angst voor verlating'. Er werden weinig significante sekseverschillen gevonden in de mate van geloof in disfunctionele relatie opvattingen en een beperkte invloed van leeftijd hierop. **Conclusie.** Resultaten bevestigden ten dele de eerste hypothese. Met betrekking tot de tweede hypothese bleek dat singles en minder tevreden mensen in een relatie in sterkere mate geloven in disfunctionele relatie opvattingen dan mensen die tevreden zijn in een relatie. Over het geheel genomen droegen sekse en leeftijd nauwelijks bij aan verschillen in geloof in irrationele en angstige opvattingen.

## 1 Introduction

It is commonly known that finding a romantic partner and establishing a satisfying relationship brings joy and happiness to most people. On the contrary, losing a romantic relationship can lead to the deterioration of one's physical wellbeing (Flora & Segrin, 1998). Moreover, several studies suggest that problems with intimacy may be related to a wide range of psychological problems, such as depression and chronic stress (e.g. Cairny, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003). Given the importance that romantic relationships have for psychological and physical well-being, it is no mystery why people are motivated to maintain or improve their romantic relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), or to put a lot of effort in finding a romantic partner. Nevertheless, with respect to the group of divorcees, Dutch judges pronounced 32.6 thousand divorces in 2007. When added to this number the non-marital relationship breakups, the total number of relationship breakups is 100.000 a year (CBS, 2008; Latten, 2004). Nowadays, in the Netherlands, one of three marriages fails to succeed (Fokkema & Liefboer, 2000). Apparently, at least in Dutch society, maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship seems to be difficult for many people. This premise is also supported by research findings, indicating an expected rise in the number of singles. According to the Dutch Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2008) this number of singles will rise from 2.5 million in 2006 to 3.4 million in 2030. This group is assembled of individuals that have never been married before and divorcees. From these statistics it cannot be derived whether the individuals that have never been married before, haven't had a serious romantic relationship before in their lives.

These developments may be explained in terms of societal changes. It is presumed by Latten (2004) that individualism and hedonism characterize contemporary Western society. Arguably, we have come to expect more pleasure and delight, and fewer hassles from and sacrifices for our romantic partners (Attridge & Berscheid, 1994). It seems conceivable that high expectations in this regard can easily lead to disappointments and dissatisfaction with a romantic partner or relationship.

In this light, and given the high divorce rates and growing number of singles, it seems relevant to investigate these expectations in order to understand the struggles of finding and maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship. Therefore, current thesis adopts the view that the content of thoughts exerts profound influence on the adjustment within a relationship and relationship satisfaction (e.g. Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). In this regard, a major focus of research has been specifically on *irrational relationship beliefs* as important aspects of relationship satisfaction (e.g. Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). Not only irrational relationship beliefs, but also *anxious relationship beliefs* are expected to interfere with finding a romantic partner or maintaining a satisfying relationship. Indicative for this hypothesis is the large amount of confirmative media messages about fears of commitment, abandonment and rejection when being in a romantic relationship. Surprisingly, relatively little research focuses either on these specific anxious relationship beliefs, or on adults who are not part of a long-term couple (the so called singles). Therefore, the role of these irrational and anxious relationship beliefs in the struggle of finding and maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship remains unclear.

In sum, the primary goal of this study is two-folded. First, given the above mentioned high divorce rates, the research was conducted to investigate the role of the two differential relationship beliefs (irrational and anxious) on relationship satisfaction. The second aim of the study was to learn more

about the role of these relationship beliefs among a sample of single adults. In order to do so, the single population was compared with the coupled one (satisfied and less satisfied). Since the majority of theories and studies (as presented below) have been elaborated merely on coupled samples, hypotheses will largely be exploratory in nature.

Besides these two main goals, this study aims to investigate the specific role of age and gender in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Prior research has only implicitly investigated the role of these variables. Since these two demographic factors are well acknowledged factors with respect to intimacy issues, the third goal of the study was aimed more specifically at this subject. Hypotheses will be drawn by thoroughly comparing the existing literature on gender and age influences.

### *1.1 Relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction*

Research investigating the specific content of relationship beliefs, is (at least) two-folded. The first approach reflects unrealistic beliefs, conceiving dogmatic standards of the relationship. Eidelson and Epstein (1982) developed five clusters of irrational relationship beliefs: 'Disagreement is destructive'; 'Partners cannot change'; 'Mindreading is expected'; 'Sexual perfectionism' and 'Sexes are different'.

The second approach focuses on the study of fears evoked when being intimate with a significant other, the so-called anxious relationship beliefs. Becoming intimate with another person entails revealing one's inner self, which in turn makes one more vulnerable. Most people recognize this vulnerability when being intimate, but some individuals seem more concerned than others about it and perceive more risk in it. These anxious beliefs reflect negative attitudes toward themselves and others as well as an essential fear of vulnerability, abandonment, rejection, the fear to lose control and to lose their own individuality and the fear of being locked up and /or lose their autonomy (Hatfield en Rapson, 1993; Carter & Sokol, 1988).

Eidelson and Epstein (1982) suggest that unrealistic relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction are significantly and negatively correlated. 'That is, lower levels of marital satisfaction were related to greater endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs' (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Other studies have reported similar findings, (Bradbury and Fincham, 1988; Möller & van der Merwe, 1997; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Addis & Bernard, 2002; Stackart & Bursik, 2003; Goodwin & Gaines, 2004; Hamamci, 2005; Sine Egeci & Gençöz, 2006; Riggio & Weiser, 2008).

In a parallel manner, anxious relationship beliefs can be related to low relationship satisfaction, uneasiness in developing close relationships and briefer relationships (Lutwak, 1985; Sheehan, 1989; Pilkington & Richardson, 1988; Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Doi & Thelen, 1991; Thelen, Van der Wal, & Thomas, 2000). Further evidence can be derived from the extensive literature about attachment processes (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). To the extent that anxious relationship beliefs may be conceptualized in the Hazan and Shaver (1987) attachment framework as an indicator of insecure and/or avoidant attachment, one may speculate that insecurity or avoidance of attachment may lead to relationship difficulties and high rates of relationship dissolution (Collins & Read, 1990; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Pistole & Arricale, 2003; Reis & Greyner, 2004).

Replicating previous studies and in accordance with Beck's cognitive model, the first hypothesis (I) predicts a negative association between irrational and anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. *That is, greater endorsement of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs is expected to relate to lower levels of relationship satisfaction.*

### *1.2 The role of relationship beliefs among single adults*

Concerning the second aim of this study, no prior research has addressed the role of dysfunctional relationship beliefs among single adults and their quest for intimacy. There are at least two ways to think about how single adults may be characterized with regard to this issue.

First, with regard to the irrational relationship beliefs, based on societal developments of hedonism and individualism, singles may have come to expect (irrational) high demands of their future romantic partners. Therefore, singles are expected to experience the same struggles in finding a satisfying relationship, as do less satisfied coupled people in maintaining one. Consequently, single and less satisfied coupled people are expected to differ from satisfied coupled people in this respect. *Thus, the second hypothesis (IIA) posits that both single and less satisfied coupled people express stronger endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs than satisfied coupled people.*

Concerning the anxious beliefs, large amounts of confirmative media messages about fears of commitment, abandonment and rejection, suggest finding a satisfying romantic relationship is a true struggle for single people. However, the quest for intimacy among single adults may be fulfilled by significant people and activities, other than a romantic partner. The only relevant study, with respect to this question, compared couples and long-term singles on their attachment styles (Schachner, Shaver, & Gillath, 2008). The results suggest that single people have just as many attachment figures available as do coupled people (Schachner et al., 2008). This suggests that singles may in fact not differ from satisfied coupled people as is commonly presumed. Nonetheless, this study (Schachner et al., 2008) has not encountered the role of anxious relationship beliefs specifically. Hence, it remains unclear whether singles resemble or differ from (less) satisfied coupled people in their endorsement of anxious beliefs. *Therefore, the second part of this hypothesis (IIB) is to test whether singles express stronger endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs than (less) satisfied coupled people.* This hypothesis is largely exploratory in nature.

### *1.3 Gender differences and the influence of age*

Based on former research, first gender differences and second the influence of age with regard to the endorsement of particular irrational and anxious belief clusters are anticipated.

Among the above mentioned literature, the study of Stackert & Bursik (2003) is the only study that explicitly takes gender differences into account. Other studies neglect this specific subject. With regard to irrational relationship beliefs, Stackert and Bursik (2003) reported men to experience more irrational beliefs regarding 'Sexual perfectionism' in relationships than women. Women on the other hand, reported greater irrationality regarding beliefs that 'Disagreement is destructive' and that 'Partners cannot change'. No significant gender differences were found on the other subscales. These findings correspond with the scripts of traditional gender roles (Bem, 1993). Therefore, a replication of previous research findings on gendered patterns of the endorsement of irrational

relationship beliefs is expected. That is, *men are expected to report stronger endorsement of the belief 'Sexual perfectionism' and women to report stronger endorsement of the beliefs 'Disagreement is destructive' and 'Partners cannot change' (Hypothesis IIIA).*

As was the case with regard to the first aim of this study, no former research has investigated possible gender differences in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs. Nevertheless, to the extent that these anxious beliefs are related to the underlying factors of attachment styles, the recent study of Schachner et al. (2008) may be indicative in this regard. In their study among long-term single men and women, Schachner et al. (2008) have found an association between attachment anxiety<sup>1</sup> and singlehood – but only among men. Regarding these anxious beliefs, the third hypothesis largely draws those research findings: *men are expected to report greater anxiousness than women (Hypothesis IIIB).*

Besides the role of gender, this study aims to investigate the specific role of age in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. It is commonly known that ideas about intimacy change during the course of life. Surprisingly, the possible effects of age on the endorsement of irrational and anxious beliefs, has not been investigated directly in prior research. Nevertheless, past research may be indicative in this respect.

Comparisons of former research findings on irrational relationship beliefs, implicate that younger subjects experience a stronger endorsement of these beliefs than do older subjects (Bradbury and Fincham, 1993; Stackert and Bursik, 2003). These results suggest that with aging, the endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs decreases.

Again, no former research has been addressed to the role of anxious relationship beliefs specifically. Results of the only indicative study in this respect (Raskin, 2001), suggested that older subjects are more likely to be intimate than younger subjects. This finding implies a possible decrease of intimacy fears and anxious relationship beliefs, as people get older.

Based on the above mentioned research findings, *younger subjects are expected to express stronger endorsement of both irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, than older subjects (hypothesis IV).*

## **2 Methods**

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### *2.1 Participants*

To examine the extent to which dysfunctional relationship beliefs are held more strongly by coupled people (satisfied or less satisfied) compared to singles, data was collected from these three different groups. The mean age of the overall sample (N = 930) was 34.8 (SD 12.8), with 285 being male (30.6%) and 645 being female (69.4%). The first group entailed 451 adults (mean age 34.2; SD 12.9) with a satisfied established relationship. This group entailed 317 females (70.3%) and 134 males (29.7%). The less satisfied coupled sample consisted of 198 respondents (mean age 36.9; SD 13.1). This group entailed 131 females (66.2%) and 67 males (33.8%). The single sample consisted of 270 adults (mean age 33.8; SD 12,1). This group entailed 190 females (70.4%) and 80 males

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<sup>1</sup>Attachment anxiety was measured by the use of a revised version of the ECR. This questionnaire measures feelings and experiences in close (not necessarily romantic) relationships. Agreement and disagreement with statements on the anxiety and avoidance subscales were measured. Sample items are 'I worry about being abandoned' and 'I feel comfortable depending on others' [reverse scored].

(29.6%). The unsatisfied coupled group consisted of 11 people (mean age 43.2, SD 11.0), with 4 males and 7 females. Within the overall sample, the mean age was 35. Ages ranged from 18 to 74, with 48.5% between 20 and 30 years old.

## 2.2 Procedures

Participants were recruited by the use of websites like Hyves and hotmail. Besides this, over 500 flyers were distributed in different public places like the university, restaurants and railway stations. In an attempt to increase the number of participants, optional feedback was offered with the completion of the questionnaire. Moreover, three gift coupons were distributed among those who fulfilled the complete questionnaire. Respondents were given a feedback option on their responses. This option was automatically incorporated in the questionnaire.

By visiting the website *www.intimiteitrelaties.nl*, subjects were linked to the questionnaire. At the start of the questionnaire, subjects were introduced with the aims of the study. Afterwards, anonymity was guaranteed, together with the possibility of winning a gift coupon. Moreover, subjects were given a questionnaire-instruction. After respondents confirmed their relationship status (single or coupled), the questionnaire was adjusted to that status. For example, where coupled people were proposed to the statement 'I'm willing to argue with *my* partner', singles were given the statement 'I'm willing to argue with *a* partner'. At the end of the questionnaire, the feedback option was offered.

Acquired data was automatically transformed to SPSS, the computer program that was used for statistical analyses.

## 2.3 Instruments

The following measuring instruments were used in the study: (1) Investment Model Scale (IMS); (2) Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI); (3) Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ).

*Investment Model Scale (IMS)*. The five-item counting satisfaction subscale of the IMS was used to determine relationship satisfaction among the coupled sample (IMS: Rusbult, 1998). The participants rated the items on 5-point scales (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = agree completely). Reliability analyses revealed good internal consistency among items designed to measure satisfaction (Alphas ranging from .92 to .95; Rusbult, 1998). In the present study Chronbach's alpha was .86 for relationship satisfaction.

*Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI)*. To state relationship-specific irrational beliefs, the subjects completed a revised version of the RBI (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), as proposed by Hunsley and Hemsworth (2002). Originally, the RBI is a 40-item instrument, counting five eight-item scales. The RBI reflect beliefs that: 'Partners cannot change'; 'The sexes are different'; 'Disagreement is destructive'; 'Mindreading is expected'; and 'Sexual perfectionism'. Each of these irrational belief clusters is assessed with eight items. However, in their study Hunsley and Hemsworth (2002) found that a six-factor solution was preferable to the five-factor solution proposed by Eidelson and Epstein

(1982). The scale 'Sexes are different' was split up into: 'Sexes are different (needs)' and 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)'.

In this version of the RBI, 'Disagreement is destructive' consists of nine items, 'Partners are different in needs' consists of three items, 'Sexual perfectionism' consists of seven items, 'Mindreading is expected' consists of four items, as well as 'Partners are different misunderstanding' and 'Partners cannot change' consists of five items. For each item, respondents indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they believe the statement is true or false (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = do agree completely). RBI total scores range from 32 to 160 with higher scores indicating a higher level of relationship belief dysfunction.

Hunsley and Hemsworth (2002) demonstrate the factor structure of the measure and provide alpha reliabilities indicating adequate internal consistency for five of the belief subscales (Chronbach's alphas ranging from .74 to .83 on those subscales). The Chronbach's alpha for the scale "Partners cannot change" was low (.58).

In the present study, in order to increase the alpha reliability on the subscale 'Partners cannot change', one item was deleted ('A partner can learn to become more responsive to his/ her partner's needs'). The present study shows Chronbach's alpha's for the entire scale of .80 with ranges of .53 till .79 for the subscales.

*Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ)*. The FCPRQ (Sheehan, 1989) was used to measure anxious thoughts when facing a relationship. The questionnaire consists of five subscales each containing six items. The subscales are labeled: 'Fear of Merger'; 'Fear of Abandonment'; 'Fear of Exposure'; 'Fear of Attack' and 'Fear of Own Destructiveness'. Participants indicate the strength of their endorsement of the item using a 1-5 scale (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = do agree completely). Sheehan (1989) reported Chronbach's alpha's ranging from .57 till .78 for the subscales. The present study shows Chronbach's alpha's for the entire scale of .88 with ranges of .61 till .75 for the subscales.

## 2.4 Analyses

To test whether greater endorsement of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs is related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted, followed by a regression analysis.

The second aim was to compare singles, satisfied and less satisfied coupled people in their endorsement of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs. In order to do so, three independent T-tests were used. The first was to compare satisfied coupled subjects (mean satisfaction  $\geq 4$ ) with singles. A second T-test was conducted to compare less satisfied coupled subjects ( $2 > \text{mean satisfaction} < 4$ ) with single subjects. Finally, satisfied and less satisfied coupled people were compared by the use of an independent T-test. Unfortunately, comparisons with unsatisfied coupled subjects (mean satisfaction  $< 2$ ) could not be justified, since only 11 coupled respondents reported to be dissatisfied with their romantic relationship.

The role of gender on the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs was tested by the use of an independent T-test within the single sample and the satisfied coupled sample. The same

procedure was conducted to compare single subjects to less satisfied coupled subjects. As for the role of age in this respect, linear regression analysis was conducted among the three samples.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Descriptives

Overall, results in Table 1 show relatively low scores on each of the RBI and FCPRQ subscales. This indicates no strong endorsement of either irrational or anxious relationship beliefs. As for the comparison of the three groups, the satisfied group reported the lowest scores on each of the RBI and FCPRQ subscales. That is, the satisfied group reported the weakest endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs.

**Table 1** Mean scores and standard deviations on the RBI and FCPQ subscales, divided by the groups satisfied coupled (SC), less satisfied coupled (LSC) and singles (S).

	<i>M (SD)</i>		
	<i>SC</i>	<i>LSC</i>	<i>S</i>
<i>RBI subscales</i>			
Disagreement is destructive	2.13 (.4)	2.34 (.5)	2.35 (.5)
Sexes are different (needs)	2.95 (.7)	3.12 (.7)	3.01 (.7)
Sexual perfectionism	2.43 (.6)	2.51 (.6)	2.59 (.6)
Mindreading is expected	2.59 (.6)	2.61 (.5)	2.61 (.5)
Sexes are different (misunderstanding)	2.48 (.7)	2.69 (.7)	2.61 (.7)
Partners cannot change	2.21 (.4)	2.44 (.5)	2.36 (.5)
<i>FCPRQ subscales</i>			
Fear of merger	1.94 (.6)	2.43 (.6)	2.61 (.7)
Fear of exposure	1.81 (.5)	2.18 (.5)	2.10 (.5)
Fear of attack	1.79 (.5)	2.06 (.5)	2.16 (.6)
Fear of own destructiveness	1.98 (.5)	2.24 (.5)	2.23 (.6)
Fear of abandonment	2.09 (.6)	2.24 (.6)	2.56 (.6)

#### 3.1 Relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction

The first hypothesis postulated a negative association between irrational and anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. That is, greater endorsement of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs was expected to relate to lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis I). To determine the relative contribution of the RBI and FCPRQ subscales on relationship satisfaction, a regression analysis was executed.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the irrational relationship beliefs, all the subscales except 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)' contributed negatively to relationship satisfaction. However, only 'Disagreement is destructive' and 'Partners cannot change' contributed significantly

<sup>2</sup>The subscales 'Mindreading is expected' and 'Sexual Perfectionism' were excluded from this analysis, due to absence of significant preliminary bivariate results.



(table 2). As for the anxious relationship beliefs, all the subscales except 'Fear of abandonment' contributed negatively to relationship satisfaction. However, only 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of exposure' contributed significantly (table 2). In other words, results imply that stronger endorsement of the beliefs 'Disagreement is destructive', 'Partners cannot change', 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of exposure' were related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Hence, these results partially supported the first hypothesis.

**Table 2** Regression analyses for the RBI and FCPRQ subscales on relationship satisfaction.

	Regression 1	Regression 2
<i>RBI subscales</i>		
Disagreement is destructive	-.24**	
Sexes are different (needs)	-.08	
Sexes are different (misunderstanding)	.02	
Partners cannot change	-.23**	
<i>FCPRQ subscales</i>		
Fear of merger		-.29**
Fear of exposure		-.27**
Fear of attack		-.07
Fear of own destructiveness		.04
Fear of abandonment		.00
Total variance explained (R <sup>2</sup> )	.156 <sup>1</sup>	.265 <sup>2</sup>

\*\* p<.001

\* p<.01

Results were controlled for age, gender and level of education.

<sup>1</sup> F (8, 652) = 17.20, p<.001

<sup>2</sup> F (8, 652) = 28.95, p<.001

### 3.2 The role of relationship beliefs among single adults

Hypothesis IIA postulated that both single and less satisfied coupled people express stronger endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs than satisfied coupled people. Results, shown in table 3, and largely supported this hypothesis. Differences appeared significant on the subscales 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)', 'Partners cannot change' and 'Disagreement is destructive'. Hence, both singles and less satisfied coupled people reported stronger endorsement of those beliefs than satisfied coupled people.

Moreover, singles reported significant stronger endorsement of the belief 'Sexual perfectionism' than satisfied coupled people. Less satisfied coupled people reported stronger endorsement of the belief 'Sexes are different (needs)' than satisfied coupled people.

Hypothesis IIB was to test whether singles and (less) satisfied coupled people differ in their endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs. When compared to satisfied coupled people, results suggest that singles and less satisfied coupled subjects expressed a significant stronger endorsement of all the anxious relationship beliefs. Hence, hypothesis IIB was confirmed.

Noteworthy; singles reported significant stronger fears of merger and abandonment than less satisfied coupled people.

**Table 3** T-test results for RBI and FCPRQ subscales among singles compared to the satisfied coupled sample (S and SC; first column), satisfied compared to less satisfied coupled subjects (SC and LSC, second column) and singles compared to the less satisfied coupled people (S and LSC; third column).

	T(721)	T(649)	T(468)
	S and SC	SC and LSC	S and LSC
<i>RBI subscales</i>			
Disagreement is destructive	-6.20**	-5.58**	-.36
Sexes are different (needs)	-1.23	-2.97*	1.63
Sexual perfectionism	-3.41*	-1.55	-1.51
Mindreading is expected	-.38	-.35	.01
Sexes are different (misunderstanding)	-2.64*	-3.81**	1.26
Partners cannot change	-4.41**	-5.77**	1.91
<i>FCPRQ subscales</i>			
Fear of merger	-13.35**	-9.57**	-2.92*
Fear of exposure	-8.34**	-9.34**	1.75
Fear of attack	-8.87**	-6.51**	-1.88
Fear of own destructiveness	-6.17**	-5.82**	0.11
Fear of abandonment	-10.08**	-2.98*	-5.94**

\*\*p<.001

\*p<.01

### 3.3 Gender and age influences

Significant differences were found in the endorsement of irrational and anxious beliefs among the three samples. Therefore, gender and age influences were explored *within* each of the three groups.

#### 3.3.1 Gender

Based on former research, gendered patterns in the endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs were expected on the subscales 'Disagreement is destructive' and 'Sexual perfectionism' (hypothesis IIIA). Within the satisfied coupled sample, T-test results (table 4) partially confirmed this hypothesis. Women reported a stronger belief in the idea of 'Disagreement is destructive' than did men. This result upholds previous research findings, as well as the notion of traditional gender roles. However, no gender differences were found in the endorsement of the belief in 'Sexual perfectionism.' Interestingly, opposed to previous research findings, satisfied coupled men reported higher scores on the RBI subscale 'Mindreading is expected' than women. This RBI subscale also differentiated single men from single women, with men again reporting higher scores than women.

In other words, both within the satisfied coupled and single sample, men reported stronger endorsement of this belief than women.

Hypothesis IIIB stated that men would report greater anxiousness than women. This hypothesis was largely rejected, since only one gender difference was found; within the single sample, men reported greater endorsement of 'Fear of own destructiveness' than women.

### *3.3.2 Age*

Hypothesis IV postulated that younger subjects would express stronger endorsement of both irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, than older subjects. Results are shown in table 5.

With regard to irrational relationship beliefs, a significant negative correlation was found on the belief 'Sexual perfectionism' among all three samples. In other words, results suggest a tendency of younger subjects to report a stronger endorsement of these dysfunctional relationship beliefs than older subjects. Within the satisfied sample, younger subjects also reported stronger endorsement of the belief 'Disagreement is destructive' than older subjects.

Surprisingly, two results appeared to be in the opposite direction of what was expected. First, within the satisfied coupled sample, the irrational belief 'Partners cannot change' showed a significant positive correlation with age. Second, a significant positive correlation was found between age and the irrational belief 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)'. These findings suggest that the endorsement of these beliefs is stronger among older subjects and weaker among younger ones.

Regarding the anxious beliefs, one significant result was found. Within the satisfied coupled sample, younger subjects reported stronger endorsement of the belief 'Fear of abandonment' than older people. In short, results only partially confirmed the fourth hypothesis (IV).

**Table 4** Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*) and *T*-test results for males compared to females within the satisfied coupled sample (*SC*), the less satisfied coupled sample (*LSC*) and within the single sample (*S*).

	<i>SC</i>			<i>LSC</i>			<i>S</i>		
	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>T(451)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>T(198)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>T(270)</i>
	Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
<i>RBI subscales</i>									
Disagreement is destructive	2.01 (.4)	2.18 (.4)	-3.67**	2.27 (.5)	2.37 (.5)	-1.51	2.31 (.5)	2.37 (.5)	-.87
Sexes are different (needs)	2.90 (.7)	2.97 (.7)	-1.05	3.15 (.6)	3.10 (.7)	.56	2.91 (.7)	3.06 (.7)	-1.56
Sexual perfectionism	2.45 (.6)	2.42 (.6)	.55	2.47 (.5)	2.53 (.6)	-.64	2.68 (.6)	2.55 (.7)	1.48
Mindreading is expected	2.73 (.6)	2.53 (.6)	3.35*	2.61 (.5)	2.61 (.5)	.07	2.83 (.5)	2.52 (.5)	4.49**
Sexes are different (misunderstanding)	2.50 (.7)	2.47 (.6)	.49	2.76 (.7)	2.66 (.7)	1.02	2.64 (.8)	2.60 (.6)	.45
Partners cannot change	2.20 (.4)	2.22 (.4)	-.34	2.50 (.5)	2.41 (.5)	1.19	2.41 (.5)	2.34 (.4)	1.25
<i>FCPRQ subscales</i>									
Fear of merger	1.97 (.6)	1.93 (.6)	.69	2.49 (.6)	2.40 (.6)	1.00	2.59 (.7)	2.61 (.7)	-0.18
Fear of exposure	1.84 (.5)	1.80 (.4)	.94	2.26 (.5)	2.14 (.5)	1.52	2.19 (.5)	2.07 (.5)	1.96
Fear of attack	1.83 (.5)	1.77 (.5)	1.22	2.06 (.6)	2.06 (.5)	.049	2.17 (.5)	2.15 (.6)	0.24
Fear of own destructiveness	1.97 (.6)	1.98 (.5)	-.26	2.23 (.5)	2.24 (.5)	-.15	2.40 (.6)	2.16 (.5)	3.12*
Fear of abandonment	2.05 (.6)	2.11 (.6)	-1.12	2.18 (.5)	2.27 (.6)	-.99	2.51 (.6)	2.59 (.6)	-.84

\*\**p*<.001

\**p*<.01

**Table 5** Regression analysis for the role of age on the RBI and FCPRQ subscales, within the satisfied coupled sample (SC), the less satisfied coupled sample (LSC) and within the single sample (S).

	F (1, 451)	F(1, 198)	F (1, 270)
<i>RBI</i>			
Disagreement is destructive	20.37**	4.16	6.12
Sexes are different (needs)	.03	.20	.53
Sexual perfectionism	33.01**	14.25**	19.94**
Mindreading is expected	.84	.01	.00
Sexes are different (misunderstanding)	.03	1.45	8.18*
Partners cannot change	14.63**	5.44	.33
<i>FCPRQ</i>			
Fear of merger	2.67	.10	.50
Fear of exposure	.02	5.15	1.58
Fear of attack	.01	.22	1.11
Fear of own destructiveness	.31	.00	1.10
Fear of abandonment	36.03**	2.96	1.30

\*\* p<.001

\* p<.01

#### 4 Conclusions and discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the role of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs in determining relationship satisfaction. The first hypothesis postulated that stronger endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs would be related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Results partially confirmed this hypothesis. Significant findings in this regard were found on the subscales 'Disagreement is destructive', 'Partners cannot change', 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of exposure'. A discussion on these results is outlined below (paragraph 4.1).

As for the comparisons between the three samples, both single and less satisfied coupled subjects appeared to express significant stronger endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs than satisfied coupled people. Results on irrational relationship beliefs show a similar pattern, although not significant on all subscales. Nevertheless, endorsement of the beliefs 'Partners cannot change', 'Disagreement is destructive' and 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)' was significantly stronger among singles and less satisfied coupled subjects, compared to satisfied coupled subjects. Results of comparisons between singles and less satisfied will be discussed below (paragraph 4.2)

Finally, gender and age influences regarding the endorsement of particular irrational and anxious belief clusters were anticipated. Largely rejecting hypotheses IIIA and IIIB, the overall results suggest a strong similarity among males' and females' endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Nevertheless, gender differences were found on the subscales 'Disagreement is destructive', 'Mindreading is expected' and 'Fear of own destructiveness'. Results will be discussed below (paragraph 4.3).

Based on previous research findings, the fourth hypothesis predicted that younger subjects would report stronger endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs than older subjects. Results on beliefs regarding 'Sexual perfectionism' confirmed this hypothesis within coupled and single subjects. Other confirming results were found among the satisfied coupled sample, with older subjects reporting less endorsement of the irrational belief 'Disagreement is destructive' and the anxious

belief 'Fear of abandonment'. However, contradicting results were found on other subscales, as will be discussed below (paragraph 4.3).

#### *4.1 Relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction*

Results of the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs will be outlined below.

Concerning the irrational beliefs, results of the significant contribution of 'Disagreement is destructive' may be explained in terms of its inevitable character. In other words, disagreement is unavoidable in almost every relationship. Not being able to cope with dissonances therefore, may be almost inherent in lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Strong endorsement of the belief that 'Partners cannot change' may lead to strong feelings of powerlessness and in turn to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Although the same could be stated for the beliefs in 'Sexes are different (needs and misunderstanding)', these beliefs are assumed to be more generic in nature. Notions on 'sexes' can be attributed to a wide range of people, whereas the belief that a 'Partner cannot change' is directed to ones partner specifically. Consequently, this might explain the absence of significant contributions of the 'Sexes are different' subscales.

Regarding the anxious beliefs, 'Fear of merger' and 'Fear of exposure' were found to be related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. No significant findings were found for fears of attack, own destructiveness and abandonment. Arguably, merger and exposure require actions of *oneself*, whereas attack and abandonment reflect actions of the *other*. Possibly, fears directed to role of the self contribute to lower levels of relationship more strongly, than fears directed to the other.

Moreover, the lack of more supporting results may be due to the mediation of dysfunctional relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction by third variables. Gender for example, appeared to be a mediating factor in the endorsement of the belief 'Mindreading is expected', as will be explained below (paragraph 4.3).

#### *4.2 The role of relationship beliefs among single adults*

Although largely similar in their endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs, singles reported greater fears of merger and abandonment, compared to the less satisfied coupled subjects. How could this be explained? Possibly, singles have encountered more negative experiences with past romantic relationships than less satisfied coupled subjects. Our data indeed support this idea. Among singles, 47.4% reported to have experienced an unfaithful romantic partner in the past, as opposed to 39.4% among the less satisfied subjects. Possibly, this kind of negative past experiences, contributes to stronger fears of merger and abandonment among singles, compared to less satisfied coupled subjects.

#### *4.3 Gender and age influences*

Overall, few gender differences in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs were found. This result resembles that of Sprecher and Toro-Morn (2002). In their research on gender differences in beliefs about love and romantic relationships, they suggest that 'gender may be overrated as social group membership variable likely to lead to differences in relationship beliefs'

(Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002; p. 142). This strong resemblance may be explained in terms of societal shifts toward gender equality in the last few decades. Nevertheless, some gender differences were found, as will be discussed below.

Although overall results indicate a strong resemblance among males' and females' endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs, three gender differences were found in this regard. First, greater endorsement of the irrational belief 'Disagreement is destructive' was found among *satisfied* coupled women. This seems surprising, since endorsement of this belief was found to be associated negatively with relationship satisfaction. Apparently, once having accomplished a satisfying relationship, women attribute more importance to benevolence values than do men, in a non-disappointing manner.

Second, men reported to expect 'Mindreading' from a romantic partner more strongly than did women, but only within the single and satisfied coupled sample. This finding may be related to the common assumption of women being more emotionally expressive than men. This may lead men to expect that women are capable of reading men's thoughts and feelings as well. As a consequence of men feeling misunderstood by women, this belief may prevent single men to find a satisfying romantic relationship. On the other hand, coupled men apparently endorse this dysfunctional belief while being satisfied with their romantic relationship. Although endorsement of this belief may contribute negatively to relationship satisfaction, males may experience relationship satisfaction more easily than do females. In other words, regardless of the role of dysfunctional relationship beliefs, men may be more satisfied within romantic relationships than women in general. Research findings of Vangelisti and Daly (1997) support this idea, with women generally reporting to be less satisfied in their romantic relationship than men.

Third, the only significant difference with regard to the anxious beliefs was found among the single sample. Single men appeared to be more anxious of their own destructiveness than single women. Common beliefs about gendered patterns in coping with (marital) conflicts may account for this result. More specifically, men are commonly assumed to externalize frustration and anger, as opposed to women, who generally cope in an internalizing manner with these feelings. Externalization of frustrations may lead single men to fear a lack of self control, when facing a conflict with a future romantic partner. Since this was the only found gender difference with regard to the anxious beliefs, the third hypothesis (IIIB) was largely rejected.

Beside the above described confirmative significant results of the role age on the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs, a number of contradictory results were found. First, within the satisfied coupled sample, older subjects reported stronger endorsement of the irrational belief 'Partners cannot change' than younger subjects. Moreover, a similar pattern was found on the subscale 'Sexes are different (misunderstanding)' within the single sample.

These puzzling results may be due to the possibility of the influence of developmental life stages, rather than age, in the (changes in) endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs. According to Erikson's (in Berk, 2006) theory on developmental stages, the stage of transition to adulthood (age 18 to 35) is characterized by negotiating the task of finding mutually satisfying relationships. Since this stage covers a span of many years, subjects within this age group may differ drastically in dealing with this task. Consequently, subjects within this developmental stage may also differ in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Alternatively, lack of more confirming results may be attributed to methodological shortcomings, as will be described below.

#### *4.4 Methodological considerations*

As with any study, particularly one as exploratory as the present study, a discussion of the methodological shortcomings is needed. First, the majority of the respondents in the present study reported to be satisfied with their relationship. Possibly, unsatisfied (and to a lesser extent, less satisfied coupled subjects) may feel uncomfortable to participate in this type of study. This may be due to the confronting and personal character of the questionnaire. Consequently, this impedes comparisons between satisfied, unsatisfied coupled subjects and singles on their endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Moreover, the relative absence of this group ( $N = 11$ ) may have led to an underestimation of the influence of dysfunctional relationship beliefs on relationship satisfaction. Second, the cross-sectional nature of our measures impedes conclusions on causality in the relation between endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs and relationship satisfaction.

Third, as a consequence of a skewed distribution of age in all samples, young adults (20-30) were largely outnumbered. This skewness has possibly distorted the relative contribution of age on (differences in) the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs remains largely unclear.

#### *4.5 Future directions*

Since unsatisfied coupled subjects were not well represented within the present study, future research should particularly focus on comparisons with this group. Results of the present study, as well as future findings on this subject may be of high clinical relevance. For example, people with intimacy issues (single or coupled) may benefit from cognitive based therapies that aim to challenge and modify specific dysfunctional relationship beliefs.

Future investigations may also contribute to a clearer understanding of the role of age and gender in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Puzzling findings on this subject in the present study are no reason to abandon the idea of the importance of these variables. Instead, future researchers need to pay more attention to the effects of other variables, such as ethnicity, social class and possibly developmental stages and their intersect with gender and age. Moreover, cohort studies might be useful to draw a clearer picture on the role of age in the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Finally, future longitudinal studies may clarify directions of found correlations between relationship satisfaction and the endorsement of dysfunctional beliefs.

In sum, by including single subjects in comparisons on the endorsement of dysfunctional relationship beliefs, the present study was intended to open up a neglected domain for further study. We hope that our initial findings motivate other researchers to dig deeper into the issue of singles compared to coupled people in their endorsement of these beliefs.



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