

**Relationship beliefs:
their association with entering into a relationship,
their change over time and with transitions in
relationship status.**



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Preface

We are pleased to present our master's thesis, dealing with the main question whether irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship. This thesis is part of the Master Clinical and health psychology of the Utrecht University. During the classes about Intimate Relationships, our interest on this theme was aroused. Lisalotte Verspui offered different possibilities for doing research on this topic. One year before our study some other students conducted a study about singlehood and relationship beliefs. We thought it would be interesting to use these results and to re-contact the participants, in order to find more specific evidence for the question why more and more individuals are single. In this way two measurements among the same participants were carried out with an interval of one year, to gain some insight in the change of relationship beliefs.

Because of the lack of information about relationship beliefs among single individuals, it was sometimes hard to work effectively on the introduction. However, or maybe thanks to these difficulties, we have learned a lot about searching for literature, writing in English and we have acquired a lot of knowledge about this interesting topic.

We would like to thank our supervisor Lisalotte Verspui, for being our guide, motivator and critical reader. Thanks for your enthusiasm during the process of thinking, publishing our questionnaires, collecting our data and writing. Also words of thanks to Elly Korendijk, for her help with the statistical analyses of our study.

After all, it was a valuable and nice experience to conduct such an extensive research.

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Abstract

Since the number of single individuals grows with the years, it seems an important endeavour to understand the psychological factors that are involved in instigating and entering into a romantic relationship. Therefore, the primary goal of the present study was to examine whether irrational (as measured with the Relationship Belief Questionnaire) and anxious (as measured with the Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire) relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship. The second goal of this study was to examine whether irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change with the passage of time and with transitions in relationship status. Data from two measurement times (with an interval of one year) from 146 single individuals (mean age 34.3 years) was analyzed (using MANOVA's and t-tests) to examine these issues. We found that long-term single individuals have more or less the same levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, compared to the single individuals who have entered into a relationship at Time 1. In accordance with our expectations, we found that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs remained stable over time. Contrary to our expectations, we found that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs do not change after the first three months of a relationship. The present study is a first step in this research area, and we hope that these initial findings motivate other researchers to dig deeper and broader into the psychological factors that might be involved in instigating and entering into a romantic relationship.

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Nederlandse Samenvatting (Dutch summary)

Aangezien het aantal vrijgezellen met de jaren toeneemt, lijkt het belangrijk om de psychologische factoren te begrijpen die een rol spelen bij het initiatief nemen tot en het aangaan van een romantische relatie. Daarom was het belangrijkste doel van de huidige studie om te onderzoeken in hoeverre irrationele (zoals gemeten met de Relationship Belief Questionnaire) en angstige (zoals gemeten met de Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire) relationele opvattingen samenhangen met het aangaan van een relatie. Het tweede doel van deze studie was om te onderzoeken of irrationele en angstige relationele opvattingen veranderen door het verstrijken van de tijd en door verandering in relationele status. Data van twee meetmomenten (met een interval van één jaar) van 146 vrijgezelle personen (gemiddelde leeftijd 34.3 jaar), is geanalyseerd (met behulp van MANOVA's en t-testen) om de twee doelen te onderzoeken. We hebben gevonden dat langdurig vrijgezellen min of meer dezelfde mate van irrationele en angstige relationele opvattingen hebben in vergelijking met vrijgezellen die een relatie waren aangegaan op Tijdstip 1. In overeenstemming met onze verwachtingen hebben we gevonden dat irrationele en angstige relationele opvattingen stabiel bleven over de tijd. In tegenstelling tot onze verwachtingen hebben we gevonden dat irrationele en angstige relationele opvattingen niet veranderden na de eerste drie maanden van een relatie. De huidige studie is een eerste stap in dit onderzoeksveld en wij hopen dat deze eerste resultaten andere onderzoekers motiveren om dieper en breder in te gaan op de psychologische factoren die mogelijk een rol spelen bij het initiatief nemen tot en het aangaan van een romantische relatie.

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Introduction

Forming satisfying romantic relationships is a basic need for most individuals (Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1963) and it is supposed to be one of the most important sources of happiness in life. Therefore it is remarkable that an increasing portion of the adult population does not have a romantic relationship (de Jong, 2003; Latten, 2004). Indeed, a study of the Rutgers Nisso Groep (Bakker & Van Weesenbeeck, 2006) revealed that 20% of the adult population in the Netherlands is single and a major part of this group has indicated that a partner would make their life more pleasant. Consistent with Latten (2004) and de Jong (2003) it can be expected that the number of single individuals will increase in the following years, to 3.4 million in 2030, which is 20% percent of the estimated total population of the Netherlands in 2030.

Although DePaulo (2006 as cited by Schachner, Shaver & Gillath, 2008) presumed that a single life can be just as fulfilling as the coupled life, a recently published study by Schachner et al. (2008) found that, compared to coupled participants, single individuals reported higher levels of loneliness, depression, anxiety and sexual dissatisfaction. Earlier research supports these findings (Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003; Khaleque, 2004; Levin, 2000).

Acknowledging the above mentioned associated problems and compelling statistics, it is an important endeavour to understand the factors that are involved in instigating and entering into a romantic relationship. Therefore the question arises why so many people do not have a romantic relationship.

Nowadays, attention is given to the understanding of the different reasons why more and more individuals are single. One of the main causes for the increase in singlehood can be socio-economic factors, such as the rising number of broken relationships, the growing number of widows and widowers due to the aging of the population (De Jong, 2003), the change of role patterns, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, more financial independence for women than decades ago (Bryant, Bolland, Burton, Hurt & Bryant, 2006), and the behavioural and attitudinal changes towards marriage and mate-selection.

Besides these socio-economic factors, it is widely accepted that psychological factors are of great importance to the development of intimacy and romantic relationships. In fact, a substantial body of literature presumes that the incompetence of developing intimate relationships is based on beliefs individuals

hold about themselves and others as well as about their relationships (van Epp, 2006; Knee, 1998). During their lifetime, individuals gather beliefs about characteristics and motives of other human beings. These beliefs are presumed to influence the interactions and close relationships individuals have with each other (DeBord, Romans & Krieshok, 1996). One group of such beliefs are the so-called relationship beliefs (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992; Fletcher, Rosanowski & Fitness, 1994; Knee, 1998; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Research investigating these relationship beliefs is aimed at different relationship beliefs. The present study will focus on two of these relationship beliefs that are supposed to be associated with being in a relationship or not: the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs. Irrational relationship beliefs are conceived as dogmatic 'shoulds' or standards about the characteristics of the relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), whereas anxious relationship beliefs usually refer to anxious thoughts felt when being intimate with one another.

Astonishingly, not much literature is available on the topic of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs among single individuals. And the little literature available about these relationship beliefs mostly focuses on (married) couples. This is remarkable because these relationship beliefs are supposed to have an important influence on initial attraction and can be important resources for coordinating early stages of relationship development (Knee, 1998). So, a relatively unexplored area of investigation with regard to relationship beliefs is the extent to which such beliefs might have an influence on entering into a relationship. The present study was conducted among a sample of single adults to learn more about these beliefs in association with entering a relationship. Given the scarce literature on the topic, this study was largely exploratory, and evidence was mostly derived from studies aimed at romantic beliefs, fear of intimacy, relationship satisfaction and couples.

Drawing upon established theories, the primary goal of this study was to examine whether irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship. More specifically, the two following research questions will be investigated:

- A. Is there a difference between single individuals with lower levels of relationship beliefs and single individuals with higher levels of these beliefs with regard to entering into a relationship?
- B. Is there a difference in these findings between irrational and anxious beliefs?

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For this purpose two measurements among the same participants were carried out with an interval of one year. At Time 0 the relationship beliefs were measured among single participants. At Time 1, they were asked whether they were still single or had found a partner.

Next to the above research questions, another interesting area of research is the influence of passage of time and transitions in relationship status with respect to relationship beliefs (Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Since it is questionable whether the passage of time and transitions in relationship status have an intervening effect on the degree of relationship beliefs, the second goal of this study was to examine the mere effect of these two variables.

Therefore the following two questions will be investigated:

- C. Do irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change with the transition in relationship status and with the passage of time?
- D. Is there a difference in effect on irrational and anxious relationship beliefs between relationship status and the passage of time?

In the following, literature will be reviewed to give support for the research questions.

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Literature review

Definitions and operationalisations

Almost every person has pre-existing beliefs about what relationships should be like (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). There are various terms for these 'generalized relationship expectations' (Sprecher & Metts, 1999), such as knowledge structures or schemas about relationships (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992; Ross, 1989 as cited by Knee, 1998; Sprecher & Metts, 1999), implicit theories of relationships (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996 as cited by Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Knee, 1998), relationship beliefs (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992; Knee, 1998), unrealistic or irrational standards, beliefs or expectations about relationships (DeBord et al., 1996; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sprecher & Metts, 1999), dysfunctional relationship beliefs (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), romantic beliefs (Sprecher & Metts, 1999), fear of intimate relationships (Lutwak, 1985; Sheehan, 1989; Thelen, van der Wal, Thomas & Harmon, 2000), and anxious beliefs (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

In sum, relationship beliefs are a group of schemata or judgments that hold all aspects of intimate relationships (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992). They are supposed to be formed by observing other couples (Sharp & Ganong, 2000) and using past relationship experiences to form expectations that influence how one thinks and acts in present relationships (van Epp, 2006).

As mentioned in the introduction, the present study will focus on two relationship beliefs that are supposed to be associated with being in a relationship or not: the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs. Irrational relationship beliefs are defined as 'tendencies that bias a person toward interpreting intimate relationship events in an irrational manner' (Kurdek, 1993). These were operationally defined by the following nine standards or 'shoulds' of the Relationship Belief Questionnaire (RBQ; Romans & DeBord, 1994 as cited by DeBord et al., 1996): we should be completely open and honest with each other at all times, we should be able to read each other's minds, we should do everything together, we should be able to meet all of each other's needs, we should be willing and able to change for each other, things should always be perfect between us, good relationships should be easy to maintain, one can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship, and romantic idealism.

Anxious relationship beliefs can be defined as anxious thoughts about close personal relationships and intimacy. The anxious relationship beliefs were

operationally defined by the following five constructs of the Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ; Sheehan, 1989): fear of merger, fear of exposure, fear of attack, fear of abandonment, and fear of ones own destructive impulses.

Relationship beliefs among single individuals and entering into a relationship

Single individuals have become more pessimistic about having a lasting relationship, but nevertheless seem to have the desire to find a perfect soul mate (Dafoe Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001 as cited by van Epp, 2006). This discrepancy between beliefs and desires may be the result of irrational and anxious beliefs about relationships, which for their part may result in difficulties finding a partner and entering into a relationship, as was proposed in the primary goal of this study.

In general single individuals have unrealistic expectations of marriage (Laner & Russell, 1994 as cited by Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sabatelli, 1988 as cited by Sharp & Ganong, 2000), as well as individuals in a relationship, and women have more favourable attitudes toward marriage, than men (Salts, Seismore, Lindholm, & Smith, 1994).

More specifically, van Epp (2006), in his study among 272 single soldiers, found a negative association between having high irrational relationship beliefs and initiating a relationship. Having too many irrational beliefs with regard to a relationship and a partner can lead to difficulties in finding a person who meets your needs. This in turn may lead to disappointments when potential partners are met.

Although the present study does not investigate relationship satisfaction, further evidence for negative effects of irrational relationship beliefs comes from several researchers who have indicated that the fore-mentioned beliefs tend to reduce interpersonal satisfaction in intimate relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Kurdek, 1993; Sharp & Ganong, 2000).

Contradictory to the above, DeBord et al. (1996) suggested that the more individuals endorse their irrational relationship beliefs, the happier they are in marriage. This could mean that higher irrational relationship beliefs predict a better relationship outcome, in the way that individuals with these higher beliefs will adjust better. Since single individuals do not have a (adjusted) relationship, it could be presumed that they have lower scores on irrational relationship beliefs than people who are involved in a relationship.

In a parallel manner high anxious relationship beliefs, such as fear of being rejected and fear of intimacy, can be associated with lack of trust, difficulties in developing intimate relationships, low relationship satisfaction and high rates of broken relationships (Descutner & Thelen, 1991 as cited by Thelen et al., 2000; Johnston and Thomas, 1996 as cited by van Epp, 2006; Lutwak, 1985; Sheehan, 1989; Thelen et al., 2000). For example, Fletcher et al. (2000) reached the conclusion that fairly high levels of trust may be a prerequisite for first dates to even occur.

Further evidence for the above mentioned associations can be derived from the literature about attachment. For one thing anxious beliefs are appointed as an indicator of insecure attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); for another thing early attachment processes are related to the capacity to form intimate relationships in adulthood (Thelen et al., 2000). More specifically, Schachner et al. (2008) examined how long-term single individuals satisfy their attachment and sexual needs, among 73 coupled and 69 single individuals between 25 and 55 (mean age 40) years. On the one hand, they found a significant association between being single and higher attachment anxiety, but only for men. On the other hand, they found no significant difference in the prevalence of insecure attachments between single and coupled participants. So, based on this study, being insecure attached can not completely account for being single or not.

Although most research found that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are negatively associated with initiating and maintaining a (stable and close) relationship (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Descutner & Thelen, 1991 as cited by Thelen et al., 2000; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; van Epp, 2006; Johnston and Thomas, 1996 as cited by van Epp, 2006; Lutwak, 1985; Kurdek, 1993; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sheehan, 1989; Thelen et al., 2000), not all the research on this theme is unequivocal (DeBord et al., 1996; Schachner et al., 2008).

Because of this incongruity in the literature, we expected that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship in one or three of the following ways:

- 1A. Long-term single individuals might have higher levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, compared to the single individuals who entered into a relationship.
- 1B. Long-term single individuals might have more or less the same levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, as the single individuals who entered into a relationship.

1C. Long-term single individuals might have lower levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, compared to the single individuals who entered into a relationship.

Change in relationship beliefs over time and across relationship transitions

A rather complicated issue, already referred to in the second goal of this study, is whether relationship beliefs change over time and whether there is an association between relationship beliefs and relationship status. More specifically, it is questionable whether relationship beliefs contribute to change in relationship status over time or relationship status contributes to change in relationship beliefs. Another possibility is that both statements are true in some manner.

Because almost no literature has been found on the change in irrational and anxious relationship beliefs over time and across relationship transitions, hypotheses will be drawn based on research about romantic relationship beliefs.

Sprecher and Metts (1999) suggested that relationship beliefs are relatively stable attitudes and values about romantic relationships. It is supposed that maintaining romantic beliefs during the first phases of dating is quite easy, as long as individuals do not experience cognitive dissonance because of experiences different than their romantic beliefs (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). In addition, Fletcher et al. (2000) found that ideal standards are reasonably stable across the first three months of a dating relationship, and after these three months they are changed to fit the perceptions of the present partner and relationship. When evidence contrary to the ideal standards or the romantic beliefs presents itself, individuals can either abandon the relationship (Knee, 1998), or stay together and adapt their relationship schemata to the lived experiences in a particular relationship (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996 as cited by Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Planalp & Rivers, 1996 as cited by Sprecher & Metts; Sprecher & Metts, 1999).

It seems that the personal choice to commit to a relationship is the significant turning point in a relationship, at which partners make these so-called cognitive comparisons (Fletcher et al., 2000) or evaluations of their relationship (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). This proposition was confirmed with the findings that romanticism did not change significantly for couples that went from a serious dating relationship to being engaged, but that there was a significant decrease in romanticism for the women who went from a dating relationship or being engaged to being married (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). For men, romanticism increased with the transition from the non-dating to the going steady stage

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(Fengler, 1974 as cited by Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Hobart, 1958 as cited by Sprecher and Metts, 1999).

Overall, romanticism seems to be stable during the first three months of a dating relationship. Romantic beliefs change with the personal choice to commit to a relationship, but this process is different for men and women.

Since the literature of romantic beliefs is applied to irrational and anxious beliefs, it is expected that a similar change over time and across relationship status can be found for irrational and anxious relationship beliefs among single individuals.

Therefore we expected that:

2. Irrational and anxious relationship beliefs will remain stable over time.
3. Irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change after the first three months of a relationship.

Because several researchers have found differences between men and women with regard to change in romantic beliefs (Fengler, 1974 as cited by Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Hobart, 1958 as cited by Sprecher and Metts, 1999; Sprecher & Metts, 1999), we will explore whether the change in irrational and anxious relationship beliefs is the same for men and women.

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Methods

Participants and design

For the purpose of the present study, two measurements among the same participants were carried out with an interval of one year.

The sample at Time 0 consisted of 309 participants, all of whom were single adults. These participants were re-invited to participate again, one year after the initial session. A total of 201 started the questionnaire, but only 146 of them completed the whole questionnaire. This sample was composed of 31 males (21%) and 115 females (79%). The mean age of the participants at T1 was 34 years (SD = 11 years), ranging from 23 to 68 years. Most of the sample consisted of individuals with the Dutch nationality (88%) and 73% of the participants were high-educated (HVE or University).

Eighty-eight percent of the participants described themselves as heterosexual (the others as bisexual or exclusively homosexual). At time 0 the mean number of months participants were single was 46, ranging from 1 month to 40 years. Roughly a quarter of the participants had divorced parents (27%) or was divorced him- or herself (22%). Only 16% of the participants was dating actively, despite the large number of participants that was not satisfied with being single (45%) and the large number of participants who found it important to have a relationship (56%) or who would have liked to have a relationship (49%).

For the purposes of this study participants were divided in three groups, namely long-term single individuals, (87 participants (60%) at Time 1; 18 males and 69 females), people who had (had) a relationship that lasted three months or shorter (42 participants (29%) at Time 1; 9 males and 33 females) and people who had (had) a relationship that lasted three months or shorter (17 participants (12%) at Time 1; 4 males and 13 females). 'Long-term single' was defined as not being in a committed relationship for at least one year.

As a result, the design of this study was a 2 (sex) x 3 (relationship status) non-equivalent groups factorial design, with repeated measures.

Procedure

At Time 0 participants were recruited through advertisements placed on websites like Hyves and Psychology Magazine and by displaying more than 500 flyers around trains, supermarkets, café's and a general practitioner office. Participants, who were single, completed a questionnaire about relationship beliefs, containing the Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ; Sheehan, 1989) and the Relationship Belief Questionnaire (RBQ; Romans & DeBord, 1994 as cited by DeBord et al., 1996). For this purpose, an online survey-system (Net Questionnaires) was used. The questionnaire was filled out completely by 309 participants. At Time 1 these people were sent an email with the request to fill out the questionnaire about relationship beliefs again. In this email the participants were also told about the necessity and the procedure of the study and about the warranting of their anonymity. If participants decided to participate they could start the questionnaire by clicking on a unique link, provided by Net Questionnaires. At this follow-up we asked participants whether they were still single, whether they had a relationship in the last year or whether they had a relationship at that time. All participants answered the same questionnaires, only the instructions differed according to the relationship status (e.g. "imagine that you're in a relationship" for single individuals and "think of your current or just past relationship" for individuals who (have) had a relationship). Before conducting the analyses, participants were divided in the three groups as described above in the participants section, based on their relationship status and the duration of their (past) relationship. For further description of this procedure, see Appendix 1.

Measurements

To examine the extent to which relationship beliefs are endorsed by the three different groups of participants, several questionnaires were used. A survey of the questionnaires used follows below.

Irrational relationship beliefs

The Relationship Belief Questionnaire (RBQ; Romans & DeBord, 1994 as cited by DeBord et al., 1996) was used to measure irrational relationship-specific beliefs. The RBQ is a 71-item instrument which consists of nine subscales: 1) we should be completely open and honest with each other at all times, 2) we should be able to read each other's minds, 3) we should do everything together, 4) we should be able to meet all of each other's needs, 5) we should be willing and able to change

for each other, 6) things should always be perfect between us, 7) good relationships should be easy to maintain, 8) one can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship and 9) romantic idealism. Participants replied on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 104 to 294, with higher scores indicating greater adherence to dysfunctional beliefs. According to DeBord et al. (1996), the total RBQ scale has a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .95. In this study the following four items were removed, because of their low ($< .3$) corrected item-total correlation, or to generate the best possible alpha: 'I don't expect that communicating with the one I love is always going to be easy', 'I shouldn't have to verbally tell my partner that I love him or her. It's obvious that I do', 'I would like our relationship to stay the way it is forever', and 'Even if my partner truly loves me, he or she won't want to be with me all the time'. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's α for the RBQ as a whole and for its subscales on Time 0 and Time 1. Also, the number of items included in each subscale are shown. In the present study, Cronbach's α ranged from .68 to .95, what indicates that the subscales of the RBQ have moderate to high consistency.

Anxious relationship beliefs

The Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ; Sheehan, 1989) was used to measure anxious thoughts about close personal relationships and intimacy. The FCPRQ is a 30-item instrument which consists of five subscales, each of them containing six items: 1) fear of merger, 2) fear of exposure, 3) fear of attack, 4) fear of abandonment and 5) fear of one's own destructive impulses. Participants replied on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 30 to 87, with higher scores indicating a higher level of fear of intimacy. Sheehan (1989) reported good psychometric properties and Cronbach's α ranged from 0.57 to 0.78 for all five types of fear. In this study the following five items were removed, because of their low ($< .3$) corrected item-total correlation, or to generate the best possible alpha: 'I am willing to have arguments with my partner', 'I trust that my partner is committed to me', 'I tell my partner enough about myself that he/she could hurt me', 'I f I sense that I am going to be rejected, I first reject', and 'I have sworn off a deep love relationship so I won't get hurt again'. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's α for the FCPRQ as a whole and for its subscales on Time 0 and Time 1. Also the number of items included in each subscale are shown. In the present study, Cronbach's α ranged from .65 to .86,

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what indicates that the subscales of the FCPRQ have moderate to high consistency.

Table 1: Cronbach's alpha (α) and number of items (N) for each subscale of the RBQ and the FCPRQ, at Time 0 and Time 1

| (Sub)scale | α | | N |
|---|----------|--------|----|
| | Time 0 | Time 1 | |
| Irrational relationship beliefs (RBQ) | .95 | .95 | 67 |
| We should be completely open and honest with each other at all times | .92 | .93 | 13 |
| We should be able to read each others's minds | .91 | .90 | 7 |
| We should do everything together | .87 | .87 | 8 |
| We should be able to meet all of each others's needs | .84 | .85 | 9 |
| We should be willing and able to change for each other | .82 | .85 | 9 |
| Things should always be perfect between us | .68 | .67 | 6 |
| Good relationships should be easy to maintain | .75 | .77 | 4 |
| One can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship | .77 | .75 | 5 |
| Romantic idealism | .68 | .73 | 6 |
| Anxious relationship beliefs (FCPRQ) | .84 | .86 | 25 |
| Fear of merger | .78 | .80 | 6 |
| Fear of exposure | .60 | .70 | 6 |
| Fear of attack | .70 | .75 | 5 |
| Fear of abandonment | .65 | .66 | 3 |
| Fear of one's own destructive impulses | .69 | .68 | 5 |

Statistical analyses

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary to the testing of the hypotheses some items were recoded, Time 1 data was compressed and the data was controlled for outliers and normal distribution. Furthermore, reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were conducted. The results of these analyses are mentioned above in the section about measurements. Also, sum- and mean scores for the different subscales were calculated and the data was controlled for homogeneity. At last, analyses were done to test whether men and women scored different on the two questionnaires.

Substantive analyses

To answer the research questions and to find evidence regarding the hypotheses, data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This test can be used in situations in which there are several independent and dependent variables. Only the hypotheses regarding change over time were analyzed using dependent sample t-tests. For an extensive description of the analyses, see Appendix 1.

Results

Descriptives and preliminary analyses

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the subscales of the RBQ and the FCPRQ for the complete sample at Time 0 and Time 1. Although all participants were single at Time 0, their scores are presented based on the relationship status on Time 1. The overall mean score on the irrational relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1 was somewhat below the mean score of 3.5, indicating that the sample as a whole was not very irrational. A same trend was seen for the anxious relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1. Participants were most irrational in their beliefs about 'we should be completely open and honest with each other at all times' and least irrational in their beliefs about 'we should do everything together'. Participants were most anxious in their beliefs about 'fear of abandonment' and least anxious in their beliefs about 'fear of exposure', although the differences between the mean scores on the subscales were small. Participants who had (had) a relationship longer than three months at Time 1 scored higher than single individuals and participants who had (had) a relationship three months or shorter, on six of the nine subscales of the RBQ. Single individuals scored highest on four of the five subscales of the FCPRQ. However, for both questionnaires the differences between the scores are very small.

Table 3 lists the means and standard deviations for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs for men and women separately. Comparing men and women with a MANOVA, revealed that men scored significantly higher on the RBQ than women at both measurements [$F(9,136) = 7.63$, $p < .05$; Wilks' Lambda = .67]. Analysis of each individual subscale, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .0056, revealed that significant differences between men and women existed for all of the subscales of the RBQ, except for 'things should always be perfect between us'.

Although men also scored higher on most of the subscales of the FCPRQ at Time 0 and Time 1 (see Table 3), these differences were not significant.

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Table 2: Mean scores (*and standard deviations*) for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs for all participants at Time 0 and Time 1, grouped by relationship status

| Variable | Scores on Time 0 | | | | Scores on Time 1 | | | |
|---|------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Total group | Single | Rel. ≤ 3 months | Rel. ≥ 3 months | Total group | Single | Rel. ≤ 3 months | Rel. ≥ 3 months |
| Irrational relationship beliefs (RBQ) | | | | | | | | |
| We should be completely open and honest with each other at all times | 3.46 (.83) | 3.37 (.83) | 3.54 (.94) | 3.61 (.79) | 3.39 (.89) | 3.29 (.88) | 3.41 (.94) | 3.60 (.87) |
| We should be able to read each others's minds | 2.87 (.91) | 2.84 (.91) | 2.80 (.91) | 2.95 (.94) | 2.77 (.88) | 2.71 (.88) | 2.71 (.87) | 2.92 (.89) |
| We should do everything together | 1.99 (.61) | 2.01 (.61) | 1.86 (.62) | 1.99 (.62) | 1.96 (.61) | 1.96 (.59) | 1.71 (.60) | 2.92 (.89) |
| We should be able to meet all of each others's needs | 2.98 (.72) | 2.90 (.73) | 3.19 (.68) | 3.08 (.71) | 3.01 (.76) | 2.97 (.75) | 3.12 (.77) | 3.03 (.78) |
| We should be willing and able to change for each other | 2.43 (.70) | 2.41 (.67) | 2.32 (.77) | 2.52 (.75) | 2.30 (.73) | 2.26 (.69) | 2.31 (.80) | 2.39 (.78) |
| Things should always be perfect between us | 2.79 (.59) | 2.80 (.63) | 2.73 (.52) | 2.82 (.54) | 2.73 (.64) | 2.75 (.69) | 2.77 (.55) | 2.67 (.58) |
| Good relationships should be easy to maintain | 2.86 (.85) | 2.89 (.85) | 2.79 (.88) | 2.84 (.84) | 2.79 (.88) | 2.76 (.86) | 2.50 (1.02) | 2.95 (.85) |
| One can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship | 2.48 (.90) | 2.37 (.87) | 2.27 (.80) | 2.78 (.95) | 2.32 (.82) | 2.30 (.82) | 2.06 (.63) | 2.45 (.86) |
| Romantic idealism | 3.18 (.73) | 3.14 (.76) | 3.19 (.46) | 3.27 (.76) | 3.04 (.76) | 3.00 (.78) | 2.99 (.63) | 3.15 (.78) |
| Anxious relationship beliefs (FCPRQ) | | | | | | | | |
| Fear of merger | 2.59 (.81) | 2.67 (.79) | 2.32 (.80) | 2.52 (.83) | 2.50 (.77) | 2.56 (.75) | 2.43 (.88) | 2.40 (.78) |
| Fear of exposure | 2.13 (.47) | 2.18 (.46) | 2.01 (.63) | 2.08 (.39) | 2.14 (.51) | 2.23 (.47) | 2.00 (.41) | 2.02 (.60) |
| Fear of attack | 2.27 (.67) | 2.29 (.67) | 2.12 (.67) | 2.29 (.66) | 2.25 (.67) | 2.26 (.66) | 2.25 (.58) | 2.25 (.76) |
| Fear of abandonment | 2.82 (.84) | 2.77 (.80) | 2.86 (1.01) | 2.89 (.84) | 2.78 (.80) | 2.77 (.80) | 2.57 (.87) | 2.88 (.79) |
| Fear of one's own destructive impulses | 2.30 (.72) | 2.36 (.69) | 2.15 (.74) | 2.24 (.77) | 2.30 (.64) | 2.35 (.58) | 2.13 (.72) | 2.27 (.71) |

Relationship beliefs: their association with entering into a relationship, their change over time and with transitions in relationship status.

Table 3: Mean scores (*and standard deviations*) for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1, grouped by sex compared via MANOVA

| Variable | Time 0 | | | Time 1 | | |
|---|------------|------------|------------------|------------|------------|------------------|
| | Men | Women | <i>F</i> (1,144) | Men | Women | <i>F</i> (1,144) |
| Irrational relationship beliefs (RBQ) | | | | | | |
| We should be completely open and honest with each other at all times | 3.93 (.94) | 3.33 (.76) | 13.66** | 3.92 (.84) | 3.25 (.85) | 15.49** |
| We should be able to read each others's minds | 3.53 (.87) | 2.69 (.85) | 23.48** | 3.38 (.80) | 2.61 (.83) | 21.55** |
| We should do everything together | 2.32 (.67) | 1.90 (.57) | 12.26** | 2.36 (.72) | 1.86 (.53) | 18.68** |
| We should be able to meet all of each others's needs | 3.51 (.73) | 2.83 (.65) | 24.86** | 3.56 (.74) | 2.86 (.70) | 24.33** |
| We should be willing and able to change for each other | 3.09 (.65) | 2.25 (.60) | 45.44** | 3.00 (.64) | 2.12 (.63) | 48.38** |
| Things should always be perfect between us | 3.02 (.50) | 2.73 (.60) | 5.74 | 2.99 (.57) | 2.66 (.65) | 6.49 |
| Good relationships should be easy to maintain | 3.52 (.94) | 2.69 (.73) | 27.58** | 3.36 (.96) | 2.63 (.80) | 18.36** |
| One can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship | 3.04 (.87) | 2.33 (.85) | 16.97** | 2.95 (.88) | 2.15 (.72) | 27.84** |
| Romantic idealism | 3.52 (.66) | 3.09 (.72) | 9.07** | 3.52 (.70) | 2.92 (.73) | 17.30** |
| Anxious relationship beliefs (FCPRQ) | | | | | | |
| Fear of merger | 2.75 (.74) | 2.54 (.82) | <i>ns</i> | 2.66 (.72) | 2.46 (.78) | <i>ns</i> |
| Fear of exposure | 2.11 (.42) | 2.14 (.48) | <i>ns</i> | 2.13 (.53) | 2.15 (.51) | <i>ns</i> |
| Fear of attack | 2.43 (.63) | 2.23 (.67) | <i>ns</i> | 2.34 (.70) | 2.23 (.67) | <i>ns</i> |
| Fear of abandonment | 2.91 (.91) | 2.79 (.82) | <i>ns</i> | 2.89 (.96) | 2.75 (.77) | <i>ns</i> |
| Fear of one's own destructive impulses | 2.56 (.73) | 2.24 (.70) | <i>ns</i> | 2.43 (.66) | 2.27 (.63) | <i>ns</i> |

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .0056$

Relationship beliefs among single individuals and entering into a relationship

The main purpose of this study was to examine whether irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship.

The first hypothesis proposed three different ways in which relationship beliefs might be associated with entering into a relationship: long-term single individuals might have higher levels, lower levels, or more or less the same levels of relationship beliefs, compared to the single individuals who entered into a relationship. To test this hypothesis we conducted a MANOVA with the data of Time 0, first for the irrational relationship beliefs, and second for the anxious relationship beliefs. As can be seen in column two to four in Table 2, the scores of each relationship status group are very similar. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were no significant differences found between the three relationship status groups with regard to irrational relationship beliefs, [$F(18,264) = .86, p = .62$; Wilks' Lambda = .89]. Furthermore, no significant differences were found between the three relationship status groups with regard to anxious relationship beliefs [$F(10,272) = .58, p = .83$; Wilks' Lambda = .96].

Since there were found no significant differences between the three relationship status groups, the question arose whether there would be differences between long-term single individuals and individuals who entered into a relationship. Therefore, another MANOVA was conducted with the same data, comparing only two relationship status groups, namely long-term single individuals ($n = 87$) and participants who had (had) a relationship at Time 1 ($n = 59$). The results of these analyses also revealed no significant differences between the long-term single individuals and those who had (had) a relationship with regard to irrational [$F(9,134) = .85, p = .57$; Wilks' Lambda = .95] and anxious relationship beliefs [$F(5,138) = .79, p = .56$; Wilks' Lambda = .97].

Overall, there were found no differences between long-term single individuals and those who have entered into a relationship with regard to irrational, as well as anxious relationship beliefs. Therefore, no evidence was found for the primary idea of this study that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship.

Change in relationship beliefs over time

The second purpose of this study was to examine whether passage of time and transitions in relationship status were associated with the degree of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs among the three relationship status groups.

In order to demonstrate that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs remain stable over time, as was predicted by the second hypothesis, comparisons were made between the scores of the whole sample at Time 0 and Time 1 for each of the subscales of the RBQ and the FCPRQ with a series of dependent-sample t-tests. Table 4 presents the mean scores and standard deviations on each subscale of the RBQ and the FCPRQ, for the total group, as well as for women. As can be seen in Table 4, the differences between the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1 were very small. Accordingly, the dependent-sample t-tests showed non-significant differences between the scores on Time 0 and Time 1 for the following subscales of the RBQ and FCPRQ: we should be completely open and honest with each other at all times [$t = 1.39, df = 145, p = .17$]; we should be able to read each other's minds [$t = 2.01, df = 145, p = .05$]; we should do everything together [$t = .63, df = 145, p = .53$]; we should be able to meet all of each other's needs [$t = -.49, df = 145, p = .62$]; things should always be perfect between us [$t = 1.50, df = 145, p = .14$]; good relationships should be easy to maintain [$t = 1.23, df = 145, p = .22$]; fear of merger [$t = 1.74, df = 145, p = .84$]; fear of abandonment [$t = .77, df = 145, p = .44$]; fear of exposure [$t = -.30, df = 145, p = .76$]; fear of attack [$t = .38, df = 145, p = .71$]; fear of one's own destructive impulses [$t = .03, df = 145, p = .98$].

In contrast with the second hypothesis, for three of the nine subscales of the RBQ, the differences between the irrational relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1 were significant, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .0056. As presented in Table 4, the dependent-sample t-tests showed significant differences over time for the irrational relationship beliefs about 'we should be willing and able to change for each other' [$t = 3.20, df = 145, p < .0056, two-tailed$], 'one can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship' [$t = 3.04, df = 145, p < .0056, two-tailed$], and 'romantic idealism' [$t = 2.97, df = 145, p < .0056, two-tailed$]. The mean differences between time intervals were .13, .16, and .14 respectively and the 95% confidence intervals for the estimated population mean differences were between .05 and .20, between .06 and .27, and between .05 and .23. The effect sizes were very small ($d = 0.18, d = 0.19,$ and $d = 0.19$ respectively). In sum, these results supported the second hypothesis, suggesting that, to a large extent, irrational and anxious relationship beliefs remain stable over time.

Relationship beliefs: their association with entering into a relationship, their change over time and with transitions in relationship status.

Next, the dependent-sample t-tests were repeated, but this time separately for men and women. The results revealed that, for the above mentioned subscales of the RBQ, the differences between irrational relationship beliefs at Time 0 and Time 1 were significant for women only (see Table 4). This means that the significant difference over time for three of the subscales of the RBQ was accounted for by the difference between the sexes.

Overall, the results supported the second hypothesis that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs remain stable over time, with the exception of women scoring higher on Time 0 than on Time 1 for the irrational relationship beliefs about 'we should be willing and able to change for each other', 'one can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship', and 'romantic idealism'.

Relationship beliefs: their association with entering into a relationship, their change over time and with transitions in relationship status.

Table 4: Mean scores (*and standard deviations*) for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs for all participants at Time 0 and Time 1, compared via t-tests

| Variable | Total group | | | Women | | |
|---|-------------|------------|--------|------------|------------|--------|
| | Time 0 | Time 1 | t(145) | Time 0 | Time 1 | t(114) |
| Irrational relationship beliefs (RBQ) | | | | | | |
| we should be completely open and honest with each other at all times | 3.46 (.83) | 3.39 (.89) | 1.39 | 3.33 (.76) | 3.25 (.85) | 1.59 |
| we should be able to read each others's minds | 2.87 (.91) | 2.77 (.88) | 2.01 | 2.69 (.85) | 2.61 (.83) | 1.63 |
| we should do everything together | 1.99 (.61) | 1.96 (.61) | .63 | 1.90 (.57) | 1.86 (.53) | .94 |
| we should be able to meet all of each others's needs | 2.98 (.72) | 3.01 (.76) | -.49 | 2.83 (.65) | 2.86 (.70) | -.32 |
| we should be willing and able to change for each other | 2.43 (.70) | 2.30 (.73) | 3.20** | 2.25 (.60) | 2.12 (.63) | 3.02** |
| things should always be perfect between us | 2.79 (.59) | 2.73 (.64) | 1.50 | 2.73 (.60) | 2.66 (.65) | 1.56 |
| good relationships should be easy to maintain | 2.86 (.85) | 2.79 (.88) | 1.23 | 2.69 (.73) | 2.63 (.80) | .76 |
| one can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship | 2.48 (.90) | 2.32 (.82) | 3.04** | 2.33 (.85) | 2.15 (.72) | 2.97** |
| romantic idealism | 3.18 (.73) | 3.04 (.76) | 2.97** | 3.09 (.72) | 2.92 (.73) | 3.39** |
| Anxious relationship beliefs (FCPRQ) | | | | | | |
| fear of merger | 2.59 (.81) | 2.50 (.77) | 1.74 | 2.54 (.82) | 2.46 (.78) | 1.48 |
| fear of exposure | 2.13 (.47) | 2.14 (.51) | -.30 | 2.14 (.48) | 2.15 (.51) | -.21 |
| fear of attack | 2.27 (.67) | 2.25 (.67) | .38 | 2.23 (.67) | 2.23 (.67) | .03 |
| fear of abandonment | 2.82 (.84) | 2.78 (.80) | .77 | 2.79 (.82) | 2.75 (.77) | .77 |
| fear of ones own destructive impulses | 2.30 (.72) | 2.30 (.64) | .03 | 2.24 (.70) | 2.27 (.63) | -.55 |

Note. Negative t-values mean that the mean value for the score on Time 0 are lower than the mean value for the score on Time 1.

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .0056$

Change in relationship beliefs across relationship transitions

The third hypothesis predicted that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change after the first three months of a relationship, at which different possible changes for men and women would be taking into account.

To test this hypothesis, a MANOVA was conducted on the difference scores between the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs on Time 0 and Time 1. Positive difference scores reveal that the scores of Time 0 were higher than the scores on Time 1 and negative scores reveal the reverse. Table 5 presents the difference scores and standard deviations for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, grouped by relationship status and sex. As can be seen, the differences between the scores on Time 0 and Time 1 are small. Table 5 also shows that the total group of participants scored higher on Time 0 than on Time 1 on the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, except for the irrational relationship beliefs about 'we should be able to meet all of each other's needs', and for the anxious relationship beliefs about 'fear of exposure'. The results revealed that there were no differences between the three relationship status groups [$F(18,264) = .97$, $p = .50$; Wilks' Lambda = .88] and between the sexes regarding their difference scores for irrational relationship beliefs [$F(9,132) = .57$, $p = .82$; Wilks' Lambda = .96]. In addition, no differences were found between the three relationship status groups regarding their difference scores for anxious relationship beliefs [$F(10,272) = .51$, $p = .88$; Wilks' Lambda = .96], as well as between the sexes [$F(5,136) = .45$, $p = .82$; Wilks' Lambda = .98].

This hypothesis was also tested by conducting a MANCOVA in which the scores of Time 0 were entered as covariate. The results of these analyses also revealed no significant differences between the three relationship status groups regarding their difference scores for irrational relationship beliefs [$F(18,246) = .83$, $p = .67$; Wilks' Lambda = .89], as well as between the sexes [$F(9,123) = 1.34$, $p = .22$; Wilks' Lambda = .91]. In addition, no differences were found between the three relationship status groups regarding their difference scores for anxious relationship beliefs [$F(10,262) = .86$, $p = .57$; Wilks' Lambda = .94], as well as between the sexes [$F(5,131) = .46$, $p = .80$; Wilks' Lambda = .98].

Based on these results, irrational and anxious relationship beliefs do not change after the first three months of a relationship. Overall, entering into a relationship cannot be associated with changes in the degree of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs. Returning to the second purpose of this study, no associations were found between passage of time or change in relationship status and the degree of irrational and anxious relationship.

Relationship beliefs: their association with entering into a relationship, their change over time and with transitions in relationship status.

Table 5: Difference scores (*and standard deviations*) for the irrational and anxious relationship beliefs for all participants at Time 0 and Time 1, grouped by relationship status and sex

| Variable | Difference scores (Time 0 - Time1) | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Total group | | | Single | | | Rel. ≤ 3 months | | | Rel. ≥ 3 months | | |
| | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women |
| Irrational relationship beliefs (RBQ) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| We should be completely open and honest with each other at all times | .07 (.60) | .01 (.68) | .08 (.57) | .08 (.54) | .02 (.72) | .10 (.49) | .13 (.74) | -.37 (.35) | .28 (.77) | .01 (.65) | .15 (.72) | -.03 (.63) |
| We should be able to read each others's minds | .10 (.58) | .14 (.53) | .08 (.56) | .13 (.56) | .30 (.78) | .11 (.49) | .09 (.80) | -.11 (.44) | .15 (.89) | .03 (.54) | .14 (.53) | .00 (.54) |
| We should do everything together | .03 (.51) | -.04 (.46) | .04 (.52) | .05 (.52) | .08 (.46) | .04 (.54) | .15 (.40) | -.03 (.40) | .20 (.40) | -.07 (.52) | -.28 (.42) | -.02 (.53) |
| We should be able to meet all of each others's needs | -.02 (.56) | -.05 (.60) | -.02 (.55) | -.08 (.54) | -.03 (.65) | -.09 (.51) | .07 (.72) | -.22 (.16) | .16 (.80) | .05 (.53) | .00 (.64) | .07 (.51) |
| We should be willing and able to change for each other | .13 (.48) | .09 (.44) | .14 (.49) | .15 (.46) | .02 (.39) | .19 (.48) | .01 (.32) | -.14 (.37) | .06 (.30) | .12 (.56) | .32 (.51) | .07 (.57) |
| Things should always be perfect between us | .07 (.52) | .15 (.81) | .07 (.51) | .05 (.56) | .03 (.59) | .05 (.56) | -.05 (.41) | .09 (.22) | -.09 (.45) | .15 (.48) | .02 (.69) | .18 (.42) |
| Good relationships should be easy to maintain | .08 (.77) | .16 (.68) | .06 (.80) | .13 (.69) | .15 (.81) | .12 (.66) | .29 (.77) | .56 (.38) | .21 (.85) | -.11 (.92) | .00 (.43) | -.14 (1.01) |
| One can never be complete without being involved in a romantic relationship | .16 (.64) | .09 (.60) | .18 (.65) | .07 (.58) | .00 (.66) | .09 (.56) | .21 (.62) | .50 (.26) | .12 (.68) | .33 (.75) | .09 (.56) | .39 (.79) |
| Romantic idealism | .14 (.56) | .00 (.58) | .18 (.65) | .13 (.52) | .00 (.63) | .17 (.49) | .20 (.58) | -.04 (.25) | .27 (.64) | .13 (.65) | .00 (.58) | .18 (.56) |
| Anxious relationship beliefs (FCPRQ) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Fear of merger | .09 (.60) | .09 (.55) | .09 (.62) | .11 (.59) | .19 (.53) | .09 (.60) | -.11 (.65) | -.21 (.42) | -.08 (.72) | .12 (.62) | .02 (.61) | .15 (.62) |
| Fear of exposure | -.01 (.50) | -.02 (.45) | -.01 (.52) | -.05 (.41) | -.02 (.30) | -.06 (.44) | .01 (.56) | .13 (.32) | -.03 (.62) | .06 (.64) | -.09 (.71) | .10 (.62) |
| Fear of attack | .02 (.61) | .09 (.61) | .00 (.61) | .04 (.55) | .19 (.72) | -.00 (.50) | -.13 (.57) | -.10 (.60) | -.14 (.58) | .04 (.75) | -.04 (.33) | .07 (.83) |
| Fear of abandonment | .04 (.64) | .02 (.65) | .05 (.65) | .08 (.61) | .02 (.65) | .00 (.60) | .29 (.73) | -.17 (.43) | .44 (.75) | .01 (.68) | .11 (.76) | -.02 (.67) |
| Fear of one's own destructive impulses | .00 (.60) | .12 (.55) | -.03 (.62) | .01 (.54) | .17 (.51) | -.03 (.55) | .02 (.87) | -.05 (.57) | .05 (.97) | -.03 (.61) | .11 (.66) | -.07 (.60) |

Conclusions and discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore two general issues. The first goal was to examine whether irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are associated with entering into a relationship. The second goal was to examine whether passage of time and transitions in relationship status are associated with the degree of these relationship beliefs. Hypotheses will be recalled and results will be interpreted and discussed below. Furthermore, limitations and strengths, practical implications and suggestions for further research will be considered.

Relationship beliefs among single individuals and entering into a relationship

The first goal led to the following two research questions: (A) Is there a difference between single individuals with lower levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs and single individuals with higher levels of these beliefs with regard to entering into a relationship? (B) Is there a difference in these findings between irrational and anxious beliefs?

The first hypothesis was stated threefold because some researches found high levels of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs among single and coupled individuals (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; van Epp, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2000; Kurdek, 1993; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Thelen et al., 2000), while others (DeBord et al., 1996; Schachner et al. (2008) found low levels of these beliefs among single and coupled individuals. The present data does not support the findings of earlier researches, in which either higher or lower levels of relationship beliefs were found. On the contrary, we found no association between irrational and anxious relationship beliefs and relationship status. More specifically, long-term single individuals did not differ in their irrational and anxious relationship beliefs compared to the participants who had (had) a relationship that lasted shorter or longer than three months.

Although not of first interest, data revealed differences between men and women on the degree of irrational beliefs. Namely, men scored higher than women on all of the subscales of the RBQ, except for 'things should always be perfect between us', indicating that men are more stringent in their irrational relationship beliefs than women. A same sex difference was found by Sprecher and Metts (1999) in their study to romantic beliefs among couples. Future research should take these sex differences into account, for example by analyzing the data of men and women

separately. Also, these results may have practical implications for clinical work with single men and women, indicating that single men and single women should be approached differently with regard to relationship beliefs.

In reply to research question A, the following can be concluded. Since the data does not support our idea of research question A that there were single individuals with low levels of relationship beliefs on the one hand and single individuals with high levels of these beliefs on the other hand, it was not possible to compare these groups with relation to entering into a relationship. With regard to research question B, it can be concluded that all participants had more or less the same irrational and anxious relationship beliefs.

Future studies should take into account other factors that may contribute to entering into a relationship or not, because no indication was found that relationship beliefs may (partially) play a role in instigating and entering into a relationship. Some other determinants that might be associated with entering into a relationship are longing for a partner, availability of potential partners, participation in activities to meet other people, satisfaction with being single, trust and faith in the potential partner and relationship (Fletcher et al., 2000), earlier experiences with relationships (van Epp, 2006), and some aspects of the relationships with parents (Schachner et al., 2008). Also, specific personality characteristics should be taken into account, because they may play a role in attitudes about relationships among single individuals (van Epp, 2006). If future research reveals more information about the factors that play a role in instigating and entering into a relationship, these insights should prove useful for clinical work with single individuals and for those individuals' own self-understanding.

Change in relationship beliefs over time and across relationship transitions

The second goal led to the following two research questions: (C) Do irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change with the transition in relationship status and with the passage of time? (D) Is there a difference in effect between relationship status and the passage of time with regard to irrational and anxious beliefs?

Hypothesis two predicted that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs remain stable over time. In support of this hypothesis, no significant change over time was found for the irrational relationship beliefs, on six of the nine subscales of the RBQ. Also no significant change over time was found for the anxious relationship beliefs.

In general, these findings are consistent with the research of Sprecher and Metts (1999), who discussed that romantic beliefs are relatively stable attitudes.

A possible explanation for the perceived stability of relationship beliefs over time might be found in theories about relationship schemas (Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992). Irrational and anxious relationship beliefs are shaped by prior relationship experiences (van Epp, 2006), which are stored in cognitive schemas of what relationships will be like. These once formed schemas might become a part of a person's values and attitudes, which are not changed easily because of a 'confirmation bias' (Nickerson, 1998). These attitudes, in their turn, guide our behaviour (Eiser, Fazio, Stafford & Prescott, 2003). This means that individuals (unconsciously) aim at information that confirms their already existing hypotheses and ideas, without paying attention to information that disconfirms their once formed schemas. For example, a woman might think that all people she trusts in will leave her, because she is worthless (which is an example of 'fear of abandonment'). Suppose she starts to trust someone and builds up a relationship with that person and suddenly that person dies in a car accident. This woman will find confirmation for her idea that everyone she trusts, leaves her, because she is worthless. While she has no attention for the fact that this person probably did not want to leave her and did not think she is worthless. In this way she will always find confirmation for her bias and will act accordingly. For instance, she might become distrustful and she might have difficulties to become attached to other people.

The last hypothesis stated that irrational and anxious relationship beliefs change after the first three months of a relationship. In earlier research, Fletcher et al. (2000) found that ideal standards are reasonably stable across the first three months of a dating relationship, and after these three months they are changed to fit the perceptions of the present partner and relationship. In the present study, the expected change was not supported by the data. This means that individuals who entered into a relationship, that lasted three months or longer, did not report lower or higher degrees of relationship beliefs than the long-term single individuals.

One possible explanation for these findings might be that a relationship of three months is too short to bring about such a degree of cognitive dissonance between the existing beliefs and the reality of the relationship, that relationship schemas are changed. In addition, it is supposed that relationship beliefs change when individuals make a personal choice to commit to a relationship (Fletcher et al., 2000). Every

individual might make this personal choice to commit, whether it is made conscious or unconscious, at a different moment in a relationship.

Another possible explanation is that when stress arises because of cognitive dissonance, individuals abandon the relationship (Knee, 1998), whereby their relationship beliefs do not have to change. For example, a man might have the belief that in a relationship everything will always be a bed of roses (which is an example of 'things should always be perfect between us'). But in his relationship he and his girlfriend regularly have disagreements and argue about them. These events do not fit his irrational belief that everything should always be perfect between him and his girlfriend, which causes cognitive dissonance and stress. Now this man has two possibilities: he might either adapt his relationship belief to the lived experiences (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996 as cited by Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Planalp & Rivers, 1996 as cited by Sprecher & Metts; Sprecher & Metts, 1999), or he might abandon the relationship (Knee, 1998). According to the results found in this study, it seems more likely that people abandon a relationship, than change their relationship beliefs. In reply to research question C, it can be concluded that relationship beliefs do not change over time or with transitions in relationship status. Since this is found, the answer to research question D is that there is no demonstrable difference in effect between the passage of time and the transitions in relationship status.

Methodological limitations and future directions

As with any study, we recognize the limitations of this research. The literature review of the present study consisted mostly of literature based on coupled individuals, because of the lack of literature about single individuals and relationship beliefs. In addition, most of the literature did not investigate irrational and anxious relationship beliefs, but other pre-existing beliefs about relationships as mentioned in the literature review. Therefore it was hard to write effectively about the concepts of irrational and anxious relationship beliefs and to draw hypotheses with a strong theoretical basis. These known facts might partially account for finding no evidence for some of our hypotheses.

Another limitation of the present study is that our sample primarily consisted of individuals with the Dutch nationality (88%), who were high-educated (73%), and of disproportionately more women (79%) than men. Consequently, the results of the present study may not generalize to other cultural and socio-economic contexts. For example, in collectivistic cultures relationship beliefs might be more realistic,

because people are more involved with each other and experience more of each others' relationships, also the troubles and difficulties. Future research should strive for a more representative sample of the Dutch community. Subsequently, future research should include participants from non-Western cultures, because it would be interesting to compare relationship beliefs among people from different cultures. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the sample may have accounted for finding no differences between the relationship status groups. Participants were very different in age, number and duration of previous relationships, satisfaction with being single, and the wish for a relationship. For that reason, future research should aim at a more homogenous sample.

Another issue with regard to the participants is that, at Time 0, participation was voluntary. It is possible that only those individuals, who were more relationship-oriented than the larger population, participated (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). Therefore it is questionable whether the results of the present study can be generalized to the whole Dutch single population.

In the following, some methodological limitations of the questionnaire used in present study are discussed. Firstly, the questionnaires used in this study (the RBQ and the FCPRQ) were developed to measure relationship beliefs among couples. Therefore, single individuals were asked to imagine being in a relationship when answering the questionnaire. According to Ashcraft (2002) most people are not accurate in their imagination and therefore their answers might be unreliable, which may account for the unexpected results. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to develop and validate questionnaires that are concentrated on measuring relationship beliefs among single individuals.

Furthermore, we based all of our analyses on self-report measures, rather than behavioural observations. According to Schachner, et al. (2008), self-report data are subjected to response bias, especially self-report data on sensitive topics such as relationship beliefs. Burgess and Cottrell (1939, as cited by Fowers et al., 2001) stated that one of the most persistent concerns about self-report measures is their veracity (which consists of truthfulness, accuracy, precision, and conformity to fact or truth). Therefore it is possible that the participants answered the questionnaire socially desirable, which is consistent with the average scores on the relationship beliefs found in this study.

With regard to the use of Net Questionnaires, we would like to make the following remarks. Because participants answered the questionnaire anonymous, without

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personal contact with the researchers, it is possible that their motivation to accurately fill in the questionnaire was low. As a result, participants may not have been entirely truthful when filling in the questionnaire, although it is hard to draw a clear conclusion on this topic because of the anonymity of the participants.

In addition, in the present study two measurement times were used. It would be worthwhile to study the same issues longitudinally, for example with four measurement times before and during a relationship, to see whether there are causal connections between relationship beliefs and relationship status.

Despite all these limitations, the present study opened up a neglected domain for further study, namely relationship beliefs among single individuals. The present study is a first step in this research area, and we hope that our attempts to gain more insight into the factors that contribute to the growing number of single individuals motivate other researchers to dig deeper and broader into this issue.

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Appendix 1