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The Dark Side of Heterosexual Romance: Endorsement of Romantic Beliefs Relates to Intimate Partner Violence

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Abstract Romance and control are often conflated by the media, and individuals may believe that certain controlling or jealous behaviors by men toward women are romantic and can be a sign of love and commitment in heterosexual relationships. The current study explored three types of romantic beliefs among women: endorsement of the ideology of romanticism, highly valuing romantic relationships, and the belief that jealousy is good. The goal was to determine whether these beliefs would be related to finding controlling behaviors romantic as well as to reported experiences of both physical and psychological intimate partner violence (IPV). We surveyed 275 heterosexual-identified women, aged 18 to 50, and measured their endorsement of romantic beliefs, the extent to which they romanticized controlling behavior, and experiences of physical and psychological abuse within their current or most recent romantic relationship. Romantic beliefs were related to romanticizing controlling behaviors, which, in turn, was related to experiences of IPV. There was also a significant indirect relationship between romantic beliefs and experiences of IPV. The data indicate that seemingly positive romantic ideologies can have insidious negative effects. Findings may be useful for clinicians and those who advocate for prevention of IPV as they illustrate a need to refocus traditional ideas of healthy relationships at the societal level.

Keywords Intimate partner violence · Jealousy · Romantic beliefs · Mate-retention behaviors · Physical abuse · Psychological abuse

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pattern of abusive behaviors, physical or psychological, used by one individual to control or exert power over another in the context of an intimate relationship (U.S. Department of Justice 2000). Although the causes of IPV are complex, certain beliefs about relationships may increase the likelihood of its occurrence. U.S. culture has been critiqued as representing romance in problematic ways to women and young girls. Script theory posits that human behavior is predictable and follows observable patterns in such a way that humans are "actors" following a stereotyped "script" and that people begin learning these scripts at a young age (Abelson 1981; Schank and Abelson 1977; Tomkins 1978). Heterosexual relationships are scripted (Gagnon 1977), and the script includes information about with whom one should fall in love, what the motivation for that love should be, and how to behave in a relationship over time (Rose 2000).

In media representations of heterosexual romance, love often occurs within the context of jealousy, control, and violence (Bonomi et al. 2013; Collins and Carmody 2011; Hayes 2014). The prevalence of "violent romance" in the media may encourage some women to conflate controlling behaviors with signs of intimacy and love (Chung 2005; Donovan and Hester 2010 Fraser 2005; Hayes 2014; Power et al. 2006). For example, many young women report that a man telling his girlfriend what to wear or how to behave shows that he cares for her and that words such as "ownership" and "protector" are used to communicate intimacy and dedication (Chung 2005). The current study investigates how harmful relationship scripts can encourage women to romanticize behaviors that are controlling or otherwise abusive, which may relate to the actual experience of abuse.

Unfortunately, IPV occurs all too frequently. A report published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control based on a random dial telephone survey indicated that more than one in three women reported experiencing physical violence or

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stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetimes (Black et al. 2011). Furthermore, nearly half of the women sampled reported experiencing psychological aggression within the context of an intimate relationship. A World Health Organization study found that, in most countries, between 30 and 60 % of women who have been in a romantic relationship reported physical or sexual violence in those relationships (García-Moreno et al. 2005). Further, 20–75 % of women reported experiencing emotionally abusive acts during the last year. The consequences of IPV are wide ranging and include physical injury, poor physical health, risks of poor mental health, and suicide (García-Moreno et al. 2005). IPV is often conceptualized as one partner's exertion of power and control over the other, and research has shown that male partner control is a strong predictor of IPV (Neufeld et al. 1999). The desire to have power and control can be manifested in many ways, but in the context of abusive relationships, violence is frequently used as a power strategy (Frieze and McHugh 1992).

Violence in interpersonal relationships has been seen as an outgrowth of normative masculinity in which men have the right to use dominant and controlling behaviors to make sure that their partners do not violate their feminine roles, for example by women wearing overly revealing clothing (McCarry 2010). Adherence to masculine norms has been found to be linked to the perpetration of sexual violence and to be mediated by the desire for control within a sexual situation (Smith et al. 2015). However, some women with traditional views of romance and relationships may find these aspects of masculinity sexy and exciting because they reflect the established romantic bedrock of feminine submissiveness and masculine dominance (Rose and Frieze 1989). Indeed, in a study with a sample of college women, those who endorsed traditional gender roles viewed traditionally masculine characteristics, such as showing dominance or having power over women, as desirable in a potential mate (Backus and Mahalik 2011).

Control and dominance are two important norms of masculinity, and one manifestation of controlling behaviors within the context of a heterosexual romantic relationship is the use of mate-retention behaviors (Buss et al. 2008). These are behaviors that are used to control or manipulate a romantic partner and to discourage potential infidelity. The Mate Retention Inventory was designed as a tool to identify the use of these behaviors (Buss 1988). This measure includes many strategies of retaining one's mate that range from the ostensibly positive (e.g., buying a gifting, asking the partner to wear a ring, being sexually intimate) to the more explicitly controlling (e.g., snooping through a partner's belongings, telling other men that the partner is troublesome). Although some of these behaviors may be interpreted as caring (e.g., putting one's arm around one's partner in front of others, giving a partner a ring or other token to show that the partner is "taken"), the behaviors clearly represent an attempt to control the partner and keep them from being unfaithful.

Furthermore, research has shown that some of these controlling behaviors are strong predictors of IPV (Shackelford et al. 2005). Specifically, the mate-retention strategies of emotional manipulation, time monopolization, and vigilance were related to reports of IPV (Shackelford et al. 2005). Other research has found that the relationship between accusing one's partner of sexual infidelity and violence was mediated by the use of mate-retention behaviors (Kaighobadi et al. 2008). It has been hypothesized that men use mate-retention strategies in a hierarchical fashion. When they are suspicious of infidelity, they first try non-violent mate-retention strategies, and if those are unsuccessful, they may then use violent tactics (Kaighobadi et al. 2008; Kaighobadi et al. 2009).

While mate-retention behaviors are clearly problematic, the fact that they are often romanticized in the media may make them seem appealing because they portray intrusive and controlling behaviors as romantically favorable and a sign of commitment and love (Bonomi et al. 2013; Hayes 2014). One study found that some men used the idea of romance to divert attention away from their controlling behaviors so that their behaviors were not interpreted as controlling but, instead, as evidence of love and commitment (Chung 2005). The young women in Chung's (2005) study described their boyfriends' control over their appearance and behavior as signs of their love. Additionally, some young people believe maintaining cross-sex (and in some cases, same-sex) friendships while partnered is inappropriate (Baker 2016). This can result in controlling and isolating behaviors being seen as appropriate and even as a sign of love (Baker 2016). Beliefs about romance in general may be related to viewing controlling mate-retention behaviors in a positive light. These romantic beliefs include endorsing an overarching ideology of romanticism, the importance of romantic relationships, and the belief that jealousy is healthy in a relationship. Endorsing these beliefs may be related to women romanticizing mate-retention behaviors; these, in turn, may be related to IPV.

Traditional romantic beliefs include ideas such as "love at first sight," that "there is only one true love," and that "love conquers all" (Sprecher and Metts 1989). These beliefs reflect a fairytale narrative that is prescribed to women regarding how a relationship should be, and they represent a script for romantic relationships. In this narrative, men are depicted as heroes who often must save the damsel in distress (Chung 2005). Although these beliefs may be strongly held, particularly by women, they are beliefs that work to maintain the gender hierarchy and have also been linked to potentially problematic consequences for women. For example, romantic beliefs have been related to lower occupational aspirations (Rudman and Heppen 2003), to higher levels of traditional femininity (Sprecher and Metts 1989), and to viewing jealousy as a sign of romance (Hartwell et al. 2015).

Romantic beliefs may also be related to experiences of IPV. Wood (2001) notes that many women who experience IPV

view their relationship through a fairytale lens. The *fairytale romance* is characterized by beliefs that the abuse could be worse and that the abuser is not being "himself." Women who subscribe to the fairytale narrative believe that their love for their abuser will stop the abuse. Hayes and Jeffries (2013) found that romantic love was the primary script preventing women from leaving abusive relationships. In their study, many women who had experienced IPV and posted about it online believed that love would conquer all and that if they loved their partners enough and were patient and behaved correctly, the abuse would be prevented. Thus, the romantic belief that "love conquers all" may trap women with their abusers, holding onto the hope that their partners will change.

Another aspect of romantic beliefs is the notion that a woman's social identity is constructed on the basis of her being in a relationship and that romantic relationships are the most important thing in a woman's life (Chung 2005; Mahalik et al. 2005). Gender stereotypes enforce the notion that women are missing something if they do not have a partner, which may make them desperate for a man (Power et al. 2006). Women are also seen as responsible for succeeding romantically, implying they are responsible if the relationship fails (Anderson et al. 2003; Donovan and Hester 2010; Fraser 2005; Power et al. 2006; Wood 2001). When women place a great deal of importance on being in romantic relationships, they may hold the belief that, when they find love, they should "make it work, no matter what" (Wood 2001, p. 253). This commitment is strengthened because the alternative of being single is seen as being worse than continuing a problematic relationship (Fraser 2005; Wood 2001). Thus, women may be more likely to remain in abusive relationships due to pressure to be coupled (Chung 2005; Jackson 2001; Power et al. 2006; Wood 2001).

Furthermore, research on the principle of least interest has shown that the person who wants the relationship more often has less power in that relationship (Sprecher et al. 2006; Waller 1938). If women are raised to believe that they must be in romantic relationships, this may influence the amount of power they hold, and low relationship power has been linked to higher risk of IPV (Jewkes et al. 2010). Although IPV has been connected to beliefs in the feminine norms of valuing loyalty and purity (Vandello and Cohen 2008), the link between IPV and the feminine norm of valuing relationships has yet to be investigated.

A third component of romantic beliefs that may be related to romanticizing controlling behaviors is the belief that jealousy is positive within the context of romantic relationships. Jealousy has been conceptualized as a fear of the possibility of losing a romantic partner to someone else, and when there is romantic jealousy, it can sometimes be interpreted as a sign of love (Ben-Ze'ev 2010). Furthermore, jealous behaviors are seen as having evolutionary significance in ensuring partner fidelity (Buss 2000). This may be because jealousy supposes

underlying commitment and is believed to demonstrate that the jealous individual cares deeply about the relationship (Ben-Ze'ev 2010). In fact, one study found that some women romanticize jealousy and view it as a good thing in relationships (Hartwell et al. 2015). In the same study, pro-jealousy attitudes were related to a desire for a hypermasculine partner who exhibits controlling behaviors (Hartwell et al. 2015).

Romanticizing jealousy is potentially problematic because a great deal of research has identified jealousy as a trigger for IPV (Babcock et al. 2004; Daly et al. 1982; Foran and O'Leary 2008; Hellmuth et al. 2012; O'Leary et al. 2007; Vandello and Cohen 2008). Research has shown that dominance and jealousy were strong predictors of IPV for both men and women, and partner suspicion of infidelity has also been related to women's severe physical victimization (O'Leary et al. 2007). Anxiety about partner infidelity has been identified as a mediator between anticipated partner infidelity and both psychological and physical aggression (Arnocky et al. 2015). Furthermore, when violence happens in the context of jealousy, it is often seen as a sign of love rather than as being problematic (Puente and Cohen 2003). In one scenario-based study, a man who used violence when jealous was seen as romantically loving his wife more than a man who did not use violence (Puente and Cohen 2003). Romanticizing jealousy is seen as a cultural belief that that allows individuals to normalize and excuse relationship violence (Vandello and Cohen 2008). Power et al. (2006, p. 181) identified "jealousy as a sign of love" as a theme in interviews with survivors of IPV, noting that jealousy was an insidious form of abuse because, at first, it made women feel loved. However, although jealousy has been linked to IPV, research has yet to specifically link pro-jealousy attitudes to the experience of IPV.

Whereas much of the research on how the fairytale narrative and cultural constructions of romance affects women in relationships has largely focused on women of child-bearing age (e.g., Chung 2005; Hartwell et al. 2015; Wood 2001), these dynamics likely contribute to how women of all ages view relationships, especially considering the fact that media images of older women in relationships are limited. Indeed, IPV is a problem for women of all ages (Hayes and Jeffries 2013; Mouton 2003; Zink et al. 2005), so gaining a better understanding of how these cultural forces affect women across the age spectrum is important.

Based on this literature, we hypothesized that, in the context of a structural equation model, (a) romantic beliefs would be positively related to romanticizing mate-retention behaviors (Hypothesis 1), and (b) romanticizing mate-retention behaviors would be positively related to experiences of physical (Hypothesis 2a) and psychological (Hypothesis 2b) IPV. Finally, (c) we hypothesized that romantic beliefs would have a significant indirect effect on experiences of physical (Hypothesis 3a) and psychological (Hypothesis 3b) IPV through romanticizing mate-retention behaviors.

Additionally, we expected the fit of the model to remain stable when controlling for the sociodemographic variables of age, SES, and level of education (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants

We recruited 275 women who identified as heterosexual to complete our survey. On average, the age of our participants was 30.26 years ($SD = 7.92$), and they ranged in age from 18 to 50 years old. Our participants showed variability in education levels: 1.5 % ($n = 4$) of participants reported having some high school education, 12.7 % ($n = 35$) reported being a high school graduate, 41.8 % ($n = 115$) reported some college experience or having an Associate's degree, 27.3 % ($n = 75$) had graduated from college, 6.9 % ($n = 19$) had some graduate education, 9.5 % ($n = 26$) reported having a Master's level degree, and .4 % ($n = 1$) reported having a Doctoral degree. In terms of socioeconomic status, participants primarily identified as working (45 %, $n = 123$) or middle class (36 %, $n = 98$), whereas a smaller number identified as living in poverty (10.5 %, $n = 29$), being upper-middle class (8.4 %, $n = 23$), or wealthy (.4 %, $n = 1$). One (.4 %) of our participants did not respond to this question. Our participants mainly self-identified as Caucasian (78 %, $n = 213$), followed by Black/African American (8.1 %, $n = 22$), Asian/Pacific Islander (5.5 %, $n = 15$), Latina (4.0 %, $n = 11$), Multiracial (1.8 %, $n = 5$), Other (.7 %, $n = 2$), and American Indian (.4 %, $n = 1$); 1.5 % ($n = 4$) of participants wished not to disclose their race/ethnicity. Two (.7 %) of our participants did not respond to this question.

Procedure

Heterosexual female participants over the age of 18 who lived in the United States were recruited for our study through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online source that can be used to recruit participants who are paid a nominal amount to complete a number of possible tasks, including research surveys. Research on MTurk participants suggest that data from participants recruited from this source have a similar levels of reliability and validity to data from other online and in-person recruitment sources (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Casler et al. 2013; Goodman et al. 2012). Research has also indicated that samples of MTurk participants are more diverse than samples recruited in traditional ways (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Casler et al. 2013).

A link was posted to the MTurk website describing "a study about variables that influence relationships." When our survey was selected, participants were taken to an introductory page for the survey, hosted on the website

SurveyGizmo.com, which contained our consent form. Once consent was given, participants completed the survey, pilot tested to take less than 30 min, and were then shown a debriefing statement. Participants were paid $.25 (USD) through MTurk for their time and participation upon completion of the survey, and a prior study has shown that low compensation (as low as $.02) does not affect MTurk data quality (Buhrmester et al. 2011).

Measures

Participants responded to measures assessing romanticizing mate retention behaviors, experiences of physical and psychological IPV, endorsement of the ideology of romanticism, the belief that jealousy is good, and the extent to which they valued romantic relationships, in that order. All scale scores were averages of responses to the items on the scale, and scale scores were formed as long as participants did not have missing data for more than one item for each measure. No item had more than eight missing responses, and the measure of romanticizing mate retention behaviors had the highest rate of missing date with scale scores unable to be formed for nine participants. We believed that due to thematic commonalities, measures of endorsement of romantic ideology, highly valuing romantic relationships, and believing jealousy is good could be established quantitatively as a "romantic beliefs" latent variable which could, subsequently, be used in our structural equation model.

Ideology of Romanticism

We used the 15-item Romantic Beliefs Scale (Sprecher and Metts 1989) to assess the extent to which participants' endorsed romantic ideology (e.g., "There will be only one real love for me"). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). High scores on this measure indicated adherence to traditional romantic ideology. The validity of this measure was established in the initial investigation. It was found to correlate with other measures assessing aspects of romantic love while also appearing to assess a distinct construct. The measure was also found to be internally consistent because Cronbach's alpha in the original investigation was .81; it was .88 in the present study.

Highly Valuing Romantic Relationships

The 9-item romantic relationship subscale of the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI; Mahalik et al. 2005) was used to assess the extent to which participants highly valued romantic relationships. Responses ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*), and higher scores on this measure indicated greater importance placed on being in a romantic relationship. A sample item is "Having a

romantic relationship is essential in life." This subscale was found to be reliable in the original investigation; Cronbach's alpha was .77. The alpha for the current study was .79. This measure was also found to be valid in the original investigation of the larger CFNI measure because this subscale was positively related to other measures of femininity and endorsement of traditional gender ideology.

Believing Jealousy Is Good

The 10-item Jealousy is Good Scale (Hartwell et al. 2015) is designed to assess participants' belief that jealousy is good in romantic relationships (e.g., "Jealousy in a relationship is a sign that people really love each other"). The response scale ranged from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly). High scores indicated greater pro-jealousy attitudes. This measure was found to be related to, but distinct from, measures of experiences of jealousy. It was also found to be reliable. Cronbach's alpha in the original study was .87, and it was .90 for the current study.

Romanticizing Mate-Retention Behaviors

The Mate Retention Inventory (Buss 1988) is a measure created to assess the experienced frequency of tactics employed to keep a mate. We adapted the 38-item short form of this measure (Buss et al. 2008) so that participants could rate the extent to which these behaviors would be considered desirable to them when performed by a romantic partner. Participants were asked to answer the question "To what extent would you find the following behaviors desirable in a romantic partner?" on a scale from 0 (Not at All Desirable) to 5 (Very Desirable). Examples of items included "Your partner calls to make sure you are where you said you would be," "Your partner asks you to wear his ring," and "Your partner takes you away from a gathering where other men are around." Higher scores indicated greater endorsement of controlling behaviors as romantic. Because this adaptation of the Mate Retention Inventory was developed for the present study, prior reliability and validity information are not available. However, it was found to be reliable in the present study; the Cronbach's alpha for our adaptation of the Mate Retention Inventory was .92.

Experiences of Abuse

The 30-item Abusive Behavior Inventory (Shepard and Campbell 1992) was used to inquire about our participants' experiences within their current or most recent relationship. The scale comprises two subscales measuring the frequency of experiencing physical (10 items) and psychological (20 items) abuse. A sample item for the physical abuse subscale is "Threatened to hit or throw something at you" and an example of a psychological abuse item is "Accused you of

paying too much attention to someone or something else." The response options ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Frequently), and higher scores indicated higher frequency of the experience of physical or psychological abuse. In the initial investigation, the measure was found to be a valid measure of IPV because scores on both subscales were higher for those identified as being in abusive relationships. It also demonstrated both convergent and discriminant validity. Additionally, it was found to be reliable; Cronbach's alphas from the original study ranged from .88 to .92 for psychological abuse and .70 to .88 for physical abuse. The alphas for the current study were .96 for psychological and .94 for physical abuse.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all measured variables are provided in Table 1. Mean scores on the three measures of romantic beliefs and interpreting mate-retention behaviors as romantic were near the midpoints for each measure. The average reported experiences of both physical and psychological abuse were low, but participants' scores did cover the entire range of the scales. Examining the bivariate correlations indicated that endorsing the ideology of romanticism, highly valuing romantic relationships, and believing that jealousy is good were all positively correlated with one another. This pattern provided initial evidence supporting the creation of a romantic beliefs latent variable from these three measures. Given this conclusion, we modeled romantic beliefs as a latent variable in our structural equation model. In our model, all three factor loadings for the measures included in the romantic beliefs latent variable were allowed to freely vary as we opted to fix the factor variance at 1 rather than any of the factor loadings so that the relative contributions of each to the latent factor would be more clear. The factor loadings were all of a similar size and represented large effects.

In order to test our hypotheses, we employed structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation in M-plus version 6.12 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2010). Standards for assessing goodness of fit were derived from published recommendations (Hu and Bentler 1999; Schreiber et al. 2006). Specifically, RMSEA less than .08, CFI greater than .95, and SRMR less than .08 were considered to be indicators of good fit.

The hypothesized model had good fit to the data, $\chi^2(8) = 17.80$, $p = .02$; RMSEA = .07; CFI = .98; SRMR = .04. In support of Hypothesis 1, the modeled pathway between romantic beliefs and romanticizing mate retention behaviors was significant and positive (see Fig. 1 for standardized path loadings). In support of Hypotheses 2a and 2b, romanticizing mate retention behaviors was significantly and positively related to experiences of both physical and psychological abuse. Given the sociodemographic

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for modeled variables

Variables	M (SD)	Actual range	Possible range	Correlations				
				1	2	3	4	5
1. Ideology of romanticism	4.15 (1.01)	1.60–6.80	1–7	–				
2. Highly valuing romantic relationships	2.07 (.41)	1.13–3.33	0–3	.41***	–			
3. Believing that jealousy is good	2.94 (.98)	1–5.7	1–6	.29***	.29***	–		
4. Romanticizing mate-retention behaviors	2.09 (.64)	.43–4.24	0–5	.44***	.43***	.56***	–	
5. Experiences of physical abuse	1.25 (.59)	1–5	1–5	-.04	.08	.10	.14*	–
6. Experiences of psychological abuse	1.59 (.78)	1–5	1–5	-.03	.09	.14**	.16*	.82***

$n = 209$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

diversity present in our sample, we also tested the fit of the model when controlling for age, SES, and level of education, our three continuous demographic variables, independently and as a set (Hypothesis 4). In all cases, the fit of the model remained unchanged and the statistical significance, direction, and effect size of the path loadings also remained unchanged. Given this, for ease of interpretation, we have focused on the model without control variables.

We also sought to test the indirect effects of our latent romantic beliefs variable on experiences of physical and psychological abuse. The romantic beliefs latent variable had a significant indirect effect on the experience of physical abuse through romanticizing mate-retention behaviors, and this supported Hypothesis 3a. The estimated indirect effect was .12 with 95 % confidence intervals of .03 to .24. Supporting Hypothesis 3b, romantic beliefs also had a significant indirect effect on the experience of psychological abuse through romanticizing mate-retention behaviors, standardized estimate = .14 with a 95 % CI [.02, .22].

Finally, because our model is based on correlational data, we tested a reverse model to see if our proposed directionality makes sense for these data. In this alternative model, experiences of physical and psychological IPV were modeled predicting romanticizing mate retention behaviors, which was, in turn, modeled to predict the romantic beliefs latent variable. The fit of this model was not acceptable, $\chi^2(8) = 48.45$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .14; CFI = .80; SRMR = .09, and the paths from IPV experiences to romanticizing mate retention behaviors were not significant.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to examine whether romantic beliefs were indirectly related to experiences of heterosexual relationship violence through romanticizing controlling behaviors. Our results supported our hypotheses. Holding romantic beliefs— which included endorsing the ideology of romanticism, placing high importance on romantic relationships, and believing jealousy is positive—related to finding controlling, mate-retention behaviors romantic (Hypothesis 1). In turn, viewing controlling behavior as romantic related to women's reports of both physical and psychological abuse (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). Moreover, our latent romantic beliefs variable was indirectly related to reports of both physical and psychological abuse through romanticizing controlling behaviors (Hypotheses 3a and 3b). It is important to note that, of the three romantic beliefs, only romanticizing jealousy was significantly related to IPV in the bivariate correlations. Thus, romantic beliefs alone do not predict relationship violence. However, romantic beliefs were related to viewing controlling behaviors as romantic, and this construct was, in turn, related to reports of the experience of relationship violence.

One of the romantic beliefs in our model was the endorsement of the ideology of romanticism, such as the belief in love at first sight and one true love. Although this set of beliefs was not directly related to reports of IPV in the bivariate correlations, it was correlated with viewing controlling behaviors as romantic. It was also indirectly related to reports of IPV in our model as part of our latent variable of romantic beliefs. Although the ideology of romanticism seems harmless on the surface, these relationships should give one pause. The way romance is depicted in fairytales and romance novels often conflates general romanticism with control (Bonomi et al. 2013; Deller and Smith 2013; Hayes 2014). Our study highlights why such conflation is problematic. It should also be noted that although stereotypical descriptions of romance are generally aimed toward young women, our study indicated that the negative effects of internalizing these beliefs may be relevant for women of a wide variety of ages in similar ways (supporting Hypothesis 4).

Similarly, although highly valuing romantic relationships was not directly related to reports of IPV at the bivariate level, it was related to romanticizing mate-retention behaviors. Further, it was indirectly related to reports of IPV in the model as part of our latent variable of romantic beliefs. When women

Fig. 1 Model of the relationships among variables of interest. The model had good fit to the data, $\chi^2(8) = 17.80$, $p = .02$; RMSEA = .07; CFI = .98; SRMR = .04. Standardized coefficients are reported. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$
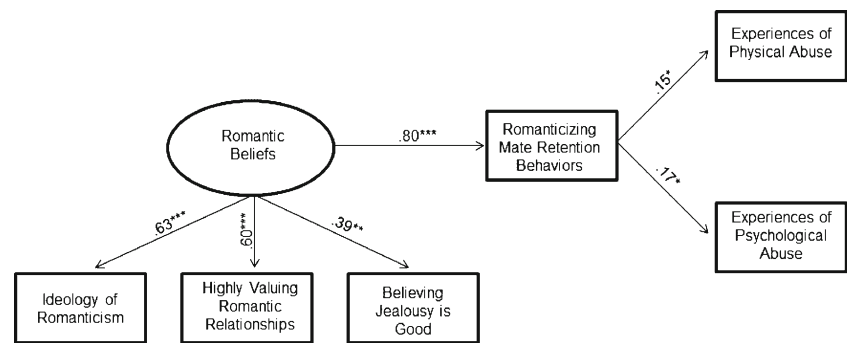
are taught that they are not complete unless they have a man, they may view any sign that a man is committed to the relationship as positive, even if he shows his commitment in a controlling manner. It is known that, in relationships, the person who more strongly desires the relationship has less power (Sprecher et al. 2006), and low levels of power within relationships have been linked to IPV (Jewkes et al. 2010). Given that women are socialized to believe that being in relationships is extremely important, it is likely that they have less relational power based on their perception that they are more invested in the relationship than are their partners (Erchull et al. 2010). Future research would benefit from explicitly exploring desire for relationships and perceptions of power in those relationships as well how those variables relate to those assessed in the present study.

Romanticizing jealousy was the one component of romantic beliefs that was directly related to reports of psychological abuse in the bivariate correlations; it was also correlated with romanticizing controlling mate-retention behaviors. Also, as part of our latent romantic belief variable, it was indirectly related to reports of both psychological and physical abuse. Jealousy is a well-known predictor of relationship violence (Ben-Ze'ev 2010; Caldwell et al. 2009; Foran and O'Leary 2008; Hellmuth et al. 2012; O'Leary et al. 2007; Puente and Cohen 2003; Strachan and Dutton 1992). However, jealousy is often interpreted as a romantic sign of commitment (Ben-Ze'ev 2010; Vandello and Cohen 2008), and viewing jealousy as an expected part of romance has been linked to the endorsement of other romantic beliefs (Hartwell et al. 2015). Furthermore, jealousy-related violence is more likely to be accepted or interpreted as a sign of love than is true of violence when jealousy is not involved (Ben-Ze'ev 2010; Foran and O'Leary 2008; Hellmuth et al. 2012; O'Leary et al. 2007; Power et al. 2006; Puente and Cohen 2003; Slep et al. 2001; Vandello and Cohen 2008). This connection is reflected in the fact that representations of love in the media often portray true love as involving intense levels of jealousy (Bonomi et al. 2013). Although previous research has documented that jealousy is linked to IPV, ours is the first known study to indicate that pro-jealousy attitudes may also be a risk factor.

The belief that jealousy is an important part of romance may be linked to IPV because people who value jealousy are more likely to act in a jealous manner or to desire partners who do so. One study found that pro-jealousy attitudes were related to experiences of reactive, anxious, and preventative jealousy (Hartwell et al. 2015). Whereas reactive jealousy is typically seen as the most positive form of jealousy because it is a response to actual infidelity, anxious (i.e., ruminating about a partner's possible infidelity, feeling distrustful and suspicious) and preventative (i.e., impeding a partner from socializing with others) jealousy are seen as more harmful (Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra 2007; Buunk 1991). Thus, a woman who thinks jealousy is romantic may be more likely to find herself in a relationship with a partner who expresses anxious or preventative jealousy and may experience such forms of jealousy herself. Such jealousy may motivate controlling mate-retention behaviors, which were also seen as romantic by the women with pro-jealousy attitudes in our study.

Romanticizing mate-retention behaviors was the link in our model between romantic beliefs and reports of IPV. These behaviors, which may seem romantic, are designed to keep a partner from straying and are a way in which one partner can dominate and control the other. The relationship between mate-retention behaviors and aggression has been suggested both theoretically (Kaighobadi et al. 2009) and empirically (Graham-Kevan and Archer 2009; Kaighobadi et al. 2008). In our study, we assessed the extent to which women desired partners to exhibit these behaviors. We found that endorsement of romantic beliefs was related to women romanticizing these mate-retention behaviors. Women with strong romantic beliefs may view controlling behaviors from their partners as caring rather than problematic and accept these behaviors without caution (Felmlee 2001). However, if controlling behaviors are accepted, they may escalate and eventually result in intimate partner violence (Kaighobadi et al. 2008; Shackelford et al. 2005). This escalation was suggested by the connection between romanticizing mate retention tactics and experiences of psychological and physical abuse in our model. The script of love can normalize controlling behavior, thus leading women to think that, as their partners' dominance

intensifies, they should interpret abusive signs as passionate as opposed to dangerous (Power et al. 2006). Thus, women who desire and strive for these traditional romantic notions may be more likely to overlook or misinterpret the controlling behavior that can ultimately escalate to abusive situations.

The problematic connections demonstrated in our study are related to how gender is typically constructed in our society. There is some evidence that men and women who endorse traditional norms of masculinity and femininity may have stronger links among romance, jealousy, control, and violence. For example, the endorsement of romantic beliefs has been linked to traditional femininity (Sprecher and Metts 1989), and women who value traditional gender roles have been shown to desire partners who endorse masculine norms such as power over women or dominance (Backus and Mahalik 2011). It is precisely such hypermasculine characteristics that have been linked to violence towards and control of women (Smith et al. 2015). Thus, future researchers may wish to investigate the ways in which endorsement of traditional gender roles and norms of masculinity and femininity influence these relationships.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with all research, it is important to consider the findings from the present study in light of its limits. Our study was correlational, and the pathways in our model may work in the other direction or be bi-directional. For example, although our model has romanticizing mate-retention behaviors predicting experiences of IPV, it could be that women who have experienced IPV change their views of relationships in response to their experience and begin to view relationships in a distorted manner. However, when we tested a reverse model, the path from IPV to romanticizing mate-retention behaviors was not statistically significant, and the alternative model did not fit as well as the one we hypothesized. Given this pattern, although we cannot draw causal conclusions, we do feel comfortable with the pattern of relationships we have depicted among these variables in the present study.

It is also important to note that, because we sampled heterosexual female participants and asked only about their experiences as recipients, rather than as perpetrators, of abuse, our findings do not imply that only women are abused and only men are perpetrators. Research suggests that relationship violence is often bi-directional and that many are both perpetrators and victims of violence within the context of intimate relationships (Henderson et al. 2005). Viewing controlling behaviors as romantic likely also predicts the perpetration of abuse. People who escalate their controlling behaviors in order to ensure the fidelity of their partners may justify their own actions as due to the intense love that they have for their partners. However, since dominance and control are part of hegemonic masculinity, but not femininity (Mahalik et al.

2003; Mahalik et al. 2005), we do contend that controlling behaviors perpetrated by men and by women are regarded differently. Because being controlling and dominant is not considered appropriate feminine behavior, women acting in this manner may be less likely to be perceived as romantic.

There are also limits related to our recruitment method because we used Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online service, and this requires potential participants to have comfort with using the internet and disclosing personal information online. MTurk has the advantages of reaching a wider audience than traditional methods of data collection (e.g., participant pools from General Psychology classes), and research has shown that data collected through MTurk is similar in reliability and validity to data collected in other ways (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Casler et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the voluntary nature of participation means that we may have had selection effects in terms of who chose to participate in our study. Furthermore, we did not specifically recruit a population of women who had experienced IPV, and the levels of violence reported were low. Our levels of reported IPV were likely also influenced by the fact that we requested participants to report on their current or most recent romantic relationship. We would likely have had higher reported levels if we had asked participants to report on all past relationships. It is also possible that some women who were currently in abusive relationships may have opted out of completing the survey due to discomfort with the topic. Future research may wish to specifically recruit women who report having experienced IPV. It may also be useful to explore how men, both as potential abusers and survivors, interpret these romantic belief constructs. Additionally, these ideas should be explored using samples of non-heterosexual identified women and men. Given that the romantic beliefs that we studied are typically portrayed within a heteronormative romantic context, they may have different meanings and predict different beliefs and behaviors for non-heterosexual samples.

Practice Implications

Despite these limits and unanswered questions, there are numerous avenues for applications of our work. This framing of romantic beliefs as potentially damaging could affect intervention work, be it with youth, adults, or, specifically, survivors of relationship violence. Those working directly with survivors of intimate partner violence may find these results useful for developing new approaches to discussing how abuse arises between couples. As a preventative measure, marriage or couples' counselors may want to consider assessing clients' romantic beliefs and feelings about jealousy and femininity, as well as how they interpret controlling behavior. Clinically, it may also be important to consider how attachment style affects these relationships. Having an insecure or preoccupied attachment style has been linked with

being both a perpetrator and a victim of relationship violence (Henderson et al. 2005). It may be that those who are insecure in their relationships may be more likely to believe that controlling behaviors are romantic because they are looking for signs that their partners are committed and dedicated to them. Thus, insecure individuals may be more likely to see controlling behaviors as romantic rather than problematic and, as research suggests, may be at higher risk for IPV. Counselors may wish to address and challenge the fact that controlling behaviors are romantic and encourage clients to critically analyze messages that they receive from media representations of romance. This may assist clients in identifying controlling behaviors as problematic before they escalate to violence.

Conclusions

The findings of our study suggest that our culture has developed a potentially damaging portrayal of love and relationships. Heterosexual women are taught from a young age that being in a romantic relationship should be one of their primary goals (Mahalik et al. 2005). They are also taught that men may display their love and passion through controlling and dominant behaviors (Power et al. 2006). Thus, in an attempt to maintain the seemingly important status of girlfriend or wife, women may accept partner behavior that has the potential to be controlling and damaging. It has been suggested that a once-attractive ("appealing") characteristic in a partner can become a negative ("appalling") attribute (Felmlee 2001). Although seemingly romantic, but controlling, behavior may initially appear to be a sign of desire or passion, women may later realize it is a form of abuse. Women are not to blame in this situation; rather, the social construction of love and romance that is presented to them needs to be reevaluated. As long as media representations conflate romance with control and jealousy, couples who internalize these messages are at risk for violence. Amending these relationship scripts will involve abandoning the idea that a successful and healthy relationship can include jealousy or control. Instead, the ideal relationship should be based on a foundation of trust and understanding between partners.

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