Why people defend relationship ideology

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Abstract

Why do people defend the institution of marriage and related beliefs about committed romantic relationships? Why do they sometimes stereotype and discriminate against single people? In this article, I review research that provides some answers. I center on the role of a set of commonly held beliefs about romantic relationships—committed relationship ideology. In particular, I focus on how system and individual-level factors can help explain people's motivated defense of these consequential beliefs.

> You're nobody 'til somebody loves you,
>
> So find yourself somebody to love.
>
> —Dean Martin (1965)[1]

The royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton drew considerable fanfare in 2011. This fairy tale-like wedding seemed to have it all: a prince, a duchess, an iconic church, a horse-drawn carriage, and even guests with questionable hats. There was also a professional lip-reader hired by the media to decode some of the secret conversations shared between William and Kate. In an exchange after the wedding ceremony, Kate

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supposedly asked William, "Now are you happy?" (The Associated Press, 2011). Of course, this line could mean many things. I am using it as one example of people's beliefs about committed relationships—in this case, that marriage makes us happier. To clarify, I use the term committed relationships to refer to almost all serious and lasting romantic relationships, including marriage. Other widely held and often idealized beliefs about committed relationships include the assumptions that it is the most important adult relationship; that nearly all people want to be in a committed relationship; and that people in committed relationships are more valuable and important than singles (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). One of the core ideas of *committed relationship ideology* is that there are more benefits surrounding life in a committed relationship than being single (Day, 2013; Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011). The goal of the present article is to better understand why these beliefs are defended.

Although beliefs about committed relationships are generally uncontested by the public, the assumptions underlying committed relationship ideology have drawn serious academic criticism. For example, some of the most widely touted claims of the benefits of marriage (e.g., health, well-being) are typically based on research with major methodological flaws, such as 50% dropout rates of the nonrandomly assigned treatment (marriage) condition (see DePaulo, 2006, 2014). When the relationship ideology lens is removed, other supposed advantages of committed monogamous relationships, such as relationship satisfaction, appear to be insufficiently supported by evidence as compared to other relationship types (see Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013). The emerging view is that the alleged special benefits of marriage and committed relationships largely outstrip the existing body of research and that, instead, many types of close relationships (e.g., friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships) are important and beneficial to those involved in these relationships.

Moreover, persistent beliefs about the intrinsic goodness of committed relationships can bring negative consequences. As exemplified in the Dean Martin quote above, committed relationship ideology inherently involves the devaluing of singles. It is also believed to be linked to "singlism"—the stereotyping and discrimination against adult singles (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006). Years of research has documented more negative evaluations of individuals described as single as compared to the same people described as being in a romantic relationship (Cargan, 1981; Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Etaugh & Malstom, 1981; Etaugh & Stern, 1984; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, 2008). For example, Greitemeyer (2009) found singles to be judged by participants as having worse social abilities, lower self-esteem, and being less satisfied with their lives than coupled targets, regardless of participants' own relationship status. These perceived differences were largely erroneous, as self and neutral observer ratings on these dimensions generally did not differ between single and coupled participants. Other research has found that even young singles (in their early-to-mid 20s) were more negatively evaluated as less warm and more unhappy than same-age counterparts in relationships (Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, 2007). Similar results are found when singles are portrayed as equally socially active (Conley & Collins, 2002). The single stereotype also appears to be applied in meaningful real-world settings. For example, singles can experience discrimination when pursuing basic needs such as for

housing (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2006), earning wages (Antonovics & Town, 2004), and paying income taxes (Kahng, 2010; see also DePaulo, 2006).

Given such consequences, why do we maintain and sometimes strongly defend these beliefs related to the institution of marriage and committed relationships?[2] In this article, I review research previously conducted with my colleagues that offers some answers (Day et al., 2011). I first consider past studies that examined broad, system-level motivations for the defense of relationship ideology. I then describe research that has examined explanations on the individual-level. Finally, I discuss these findings, including research on committed relationships and single life.

The role of system justification

Individuals may defend committed relationship ideology because they serve the interests of one's group or for reasons of self-interest. Another psychological possibility is that these beliefs satisfy needs associated with motivations to believe in a legitimate, fair, and just society. According to system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; van der Toorn & Jost, 2014), people are motivated to rationalize and defend the status quo. We want to view the systems that oversee our lives (e.g., a university, organization, government, religion, and society as a whole) as predictable and orderly and operating in a fair and legitimate manner. Thus, people will engage in a variety of psychological processes to help shield themselves from the threat associated with accepting random, uncertain, or illegitimate system conditions (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). Although perhaps not obvious at first glance, there are many reasons to think that idealized beliefs about committed relationships may reflect conditions similar to other systems, such as the government or religion. For example, legitimacy is believed to be an important aspect of committed relationships, especially marriage. Beliefs about committed relationships may also provide people with perceptions of a relatively straightforward path and means to attain prescribed life goals (e.g., a stable life, shared home, children, and improved well-being). Thus, it is possible that relationship ideology may serve to preserve beliefs in legitimacy, reduce uncertainty, and offer a sense of control and order over people's lives. This is important because past research has found that relevant systems that offer control and order (e.g., government and religion) are more likely to be legitimized and defended as part of status quo (Kay et al., 2008, 2009). Therefore, the motivation to perceive society as fair, orderly, and legitimate may uniquely explain people's defense of relationship ideology (Day et al., 2011).

If individuals defend relationship ideology, in part, to satisfy system justification needs, then people should be more defensive of these beliefs when the system justification motive is active. With my colleagues, I conducted two research studies that tested this possibility (Day et al., 2011). Under the assumption that people care about belonging to legitimate systems, a salient threat to the legitimacy of a relevant system should activate system defensive responses. In the first study, we randomly exposed a sample of Canadian participants to information that either did or did not threaten the overarching system. The threatening information described the systematically unfair treatment of Arab–Canadian citizens following 9/11, whereas the nonthreatening information

described relatively fair treatment of the same group. Next, participants read details of a supposedly year-long research study (e.g., information on participants and study design), which compared the lives of singles to those in committed relationships. The information was identical for all participants, except for the study conclusions that either affirmed beliefs about committed relationships (e.g., people in relationships were found to be happier and more satisfied than singles) or threatened relationship ideology (e.g., people in relationships reported not being happier or more satisfied than singles). Participants were then given the opportunity to write open-ended criticisms of the year-long research study. All criticisms were counted (e.g., ''the study size was too small'') and were used to indicate whether participants' defense of relationship ideology would vary by condition. For instance, when the study conclusions challenged relationship ideology, did participants try to defend their beliefs by becoming more critical of the research methods? Importantly, was this the case when participants' system-defending motivations were active? Results indicated that the combination of these factors mattered.

After reading about nonthreatening information regarding the system, participants did not differ in the number of study criticisms they offered. That is, it did not matter if they also read information that threatened committed relationship ideals. However, exposure to a threat to a relevant system led to more criticisms of the research study when the findings threatened beliefs about committed relationships compared to when the study affirmed these beliefs. This suggests that when the system justification motive was active, participants were motivated to defend relationship ideology more when it was threatened. It is noteworthy that the degree of threat to relationship ideology was seemingly slight—merely claims that the benefits of being in a committed relationship were not much different than that of single life. Nonetheless, when participants' system motivations were active, and people's needs such as for control and order were heightened, this threat appeared sufficient to require defense. However, there is an important caveat to these findings—they were found only for men. The same pattern of defensive responding was not significant for women. This gender-based finding was not initially predicted.

We conducted a replication study to confirm the initial results (Day et al., 2011). One possibility was that participants may have responded differently to the specific system threat employed. Therefore, the second study relied on a new sample of participants and the same setup and materials as before, except that a system threat from past research was used (Kay et al., 2009; Kay & Friesen, 2011; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). This time participants read a broad critique of how the economic and social systems in society were either poorly operating (i.e., a system threat) or well-functioning. The results of this study revealed a very similar pattern. Participants showed increased defense of committed relationship ideology only when the system justification motive was active and when relationship ideology was under threat. Once again, this pattern only emerged for men. As this was found across two studies, it supported the possibility that the role of system justification in relationship ideology defense may apply mostly to men.

Another study was then conducted which served two purposes (Day et al., 2011). First, we sought to test the conceptually reverse association. If committed relationship ideology reflects a system that can satisfy broader system justification needs, then following threat, other systems may be substituted to help fulfill these needs. For example,

when beliefs about relationships are challenged, and needs such as for control and order are thus heightened, people may respond by defending other similar systems (e.g., government or religion) in an effort to satisfy desires for external control and order. This would be consistent with prior research which has demonstrated that seemingly unrelated systems can operate in a substitutable manner (Kay et al., 2008; Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010). The second purpose of this study was to test whether the repeated gender difference would emerge using different materials and experimental design.

To conduct these tests, we examined whether threats to beliefs about relationships would, in turn, lead to defense of the sociopolitical system (Day et al., 2011). Participants recruited for this study were first asked to read one of two similarly worded articles on committed relationships. One article, "The era of committed relationships," affirmed relationship ideology by describing marriage and coupling as relatively stable and valued by society. The other article, "The era of 'not-so' committed relationships," threatened relationship ideology by describing the rise of singlehood, divorce, and doubt of the value of committed relationships. Afterward, participants rated items indicating their defense of the legitimacy and fairness of the overall system (Kay & Jost, 2003). Compared with the exposure to information that did not threaten relationship ideology, study results indicated that men more vigorously defended the overarching system after being exposed to a relationship ideology threat. There was no effect of the relationship ideology manipulation on women's defense of the sociopolitical system. In other words, this study demonstrated that men reflexively responded to a threat to relationship ideology in a way that suggests that the same type of psychological processes may be involved as in the defense of other external systems (e.g., Kay et al., 2010).

What is an underlying reason why people defend committed relationship ideology?

To follow-up our earlier findings, we conducted a study to test a possible mechanism of why relationship ideology is defended (Day et al., 2011). We hypothesized that beliefs surrounding committed relationships may be defended, in part, because they offer perceptions of predictability, structure, and control over life outcomes, similar to what has been documented in other systems (Kay et al., 2008, 2010). If committed relationships provide a sense of control over positive and negative outcomes in relationships, then they may be more strongly coveted than alternatives (e.g., perceptions of single life), in which life outcomes may be perceived as uncontrolled, unstructured, or simply unknown. Thus, another study tested whether construing relationships as offering control over people's lives affected defense of relationship ideals. In this study, participants were first asked to read a short article that described research on committed relationships. In one condition, the research depicted committed relationships as a means to control one's level of well-being as well as being able to provide stability and order over daily life. This was compared to other possible sources, such as one's quality of work or leisure activities. In the other condition, participants read about very similar research that found being in a committed relationship was not related to increased control and order but that work and leisure activities did have some influence. In a second task, participants' defense of

relationship ideology was assessed. Participants indicated their agreement with a variety of items, such as "There are very few major downsides to being in a committed relationship," "Most of my single friends would be better-off in a committed relationship," and "Single people are missing out." As predicted, when committed relationships were perceived as offering control over people's lives, participants increased their defense of committed relationship ideology compared to when relationships were perceived as not offering special control over people's lives. As in the previous studies, this effect was found only for men. Overall, these results suggest that the psychological benefits of perceived predictability and control are part of the underlying reasons why committed relationship ideology is defended.

Some questions still remained. For example, why did men's defense of relationship ideology relate to system-level motivations, but not women's? We can rule out a couple of possibilities. It does not appear to be a matter of ceiling effects—women were not defending relationship ideology (or the overarching system) to a much different degree than men, and there was still room for variance in responding. It also does not appear to be due to the materials used. For example, we employed two manipulations of system threat and found similar results, and past research in this area has not typically found gender differences of this kind. It appears that men, but not women, were simply responding in a manner suggesting that their defense of relationship ideology is tied to system justification motivations. This research thus pushes the boundaries of system justification theory. Although additional investigation is still required, there has been some work in this direction.

Can cross-cultural evidence provide additional insight?

Further explanation of why men defend relationship ideology may come from taking broad contextual factors into consideration. For example, there is ample research delineating how men tend to benefit more from overall societal arrangements than women (e.g., Jackman, 1994). If committed relationship ideology reflects conditions that are embedded in this broader system that advantages men, then men may be more likely to endorse beliefs surrounding marriage and committed relationships. In other words, as men are usually more advantaged than women in social, political, and economic spheres, this suggests that they have more to lose and are therefore more likely to defend dominant arrangements when they are challenged (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Levin, Liu, & Pratto, 2000). A prior research study tested these notions (Day et al., 2011). Specifically, it was examined whether men's (compared to women's) defense of relationship ideology would be related to system justification tendencies (e.g., system defense), when broader societal arrangements that tend to advantage men are more under threat.

In this cross-cultural research, we used an existing data set made available through the World Values Survey. In this survey, the same questions were administered to nationally representative samples of individuals in countries around the world. We were able to include over 33,000 respondents from 29 countries in the sample. To assess defense of committed relationship ideology, we used an indicator of the defense of marriage ("Marriage is an outdated institution," reverse scored). We also used an indicator of

system defense (i.e., a political system rating from very bad to very good). To reveal the extent that male-dominated arrangements may be under threat, we also included a measure of gender equality (United Nations Gender Empowerment Measure). This nation-level variable indicates the political and economic participation of women. No country has perfect gender equality, and thus many gains by women are needed in order to close the gender gap. Consistent with our previous studies, we included gender in our model and controlled for other relevant factors, including gross domestic product, age, income, education, and relationship status.

This study revealed that the tendency to defend marriage was related to the tendency to defend one's political system and that men showed this association significantly more than women. However, cultural context was important. In more unequal countries where men wielded considerably more economic and social power than women, there was no meaningful association between political system and relationship ideology defense. The main finding was only significant in countries where gender equality was relatively higher. Thus, it appears that in countries where the typical social and economic advantages over women were smaller and under threat, men were more likely to link the protection of relationship ideals with the defense of the overarching system. This suggests that in addition to system justification, men's defense of beliefs surrounding the institution of marriage may also be related to beliefs about social dominance and the preservation of group hierarchies (Sidanious & Pratto, 1999). Future research that measures endorsement of social dominance beliefs and tracks changes in system advantages, such as levels of gender inequality and perceived attempts to reduce inequality over time (e.g., campaigns for equal pay), could additionally support this claim.

When do women (and men) defend committed relationship ideology?

The previous studies did not document when women may be more likely, or equally likely, to defend relationship ideology. One possibility is that relationship ideology is also tied to people's self-concepts and personal goals. For example, those who subscribe to relationship ideology may also value the notion of being in a committed romantic relationship themselves. Although women tend to value their relational identities more strongly than men, these identities can be important components of both women's and men's self-concepts (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). It is thus possible that women and men are driven to defend beliefs about committed relationships in an effort to maintain their relational identities. If this is the case, then individuals may be particularly likely to defend committed relationship ideology when they feel insecure about their relational identities, such as when some aspect of the self is under threat, as in prior research (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998).

This hypothesis was tested in a laboratory study on the supposed associations between personality traits and advertising preferences (Day et al., 2011). In line with the study guise, student participants completed a personality test and then rated various consumer products (e.g., candy bars and textbooks). Next, participants were informed of their personality tests scores—the key study manipulation. Among several other dimensions, participants were supplied with a relationship ability score. Unbeknownst to participants

these scores were bogus. In the low relationship identity threat condition, participants received relationship ability scores in the 78th percentile compared to their peers. The scores were described as meaning that a participant's lifetime romantic relationship "will very likely be a successful and positive experience." However, in the high relationship identity threat condition, participants received dishearteningly low scores in the 38th percentile. They were informed that their score indicated that their lifetime romantic relationship "will very likely be an unsuccessful and negative experience." Next, participants completed a questionnaire of advertising preferences and general life values. Embedded questions assessed defense of committed relationship ideology (e.g., "Most people should be in committed relationships," "Committed relationships improve the lives of both partners involved"), as well as work and education values important to students (e.g., "It is essential that people pursue a decent education"). These latter values were used to determine whether endorsement of all values would change in response to the manipulation or only committed relationship values that are more relevant to the feedback received.

Results confirmed our expectations. Rather than distancing from relationship ideology, women and men exposed to a high relationship identity threat defended committed relationship beliefs more staunchly than those exposed to less threatening relationship identity information. Other values (e.g., education) that were presumably unrelated to participants' relational identities did not vary by condition. These results suggest that the defense of relationship ideology can also be driven, in part, by women's and men's desire to maintain their relational identities. In this case, it appears that when people felt insecure about their romantic relationship potential, they responded by endorsing committed relationship ideals more enthusiastically than when they felt secure about their relational self-concepts.

As committed relationship ideology implies the devaluing of single life, this research may provide insight into some situations where singles are subject to unwanted stereotyping and discrimination. Although there are many potential explanations for stereotyping and prejudice, it is conceivable that individuals may be more likely to question the sincerity of singles who, for example, report being happy, if they do not feel sufficient relational security. It may also partly explain other occasions in which we witness strong defense of committed relationship ideals in our everyday lives. For instance, this research appears to match observations of the "projected anxieties" of individuals (friends, family, and acquaintances) who harass long-term singles about being single, instead of showing concern for other aspects of their lives (Klinenberg, 2012, p. 66). If these perhaps well-intentioned individuals felt less threatened, were more secure, or had affirmed relational identities, it is possible that singles' lives would be more respected. Future research could confirm these assertions.

Discussion

People may assume that idealized beliefs about committed relationships are true (e.g., marriage makes people happier) and they may defend these beliefs without full awareness of the reasons why (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). One benefit of the research reviewed here is that it sheds some light on why individuals strongly defend

committed relationship ideology, including many beliefs concerning the institution of marriage. Specifically, there is evidence that people's defense of committed relationship ideology may at times stem from a broad motivation to defend the system, as well as from more individual-level drivers, such as the maintenance of people's relationship identities. It is perhaps interesting to note that throughout this research, the same overall patterns of findings were found for individuals who were single and those who were in committed relationships (Day et al., 2011). That is, singles appear to strongly defend these beliefs even though they may be subject to stereotyping and discrimination linked to the endorsement of the very same relationship ideology. This lends further support to the notion that people may be motivated to protect these beliefs beyond simply rationalizing their current relationship status or because of immediate self-interest.

The research reviewed focused on why people defend ideology concerning coupling and marriage; however, there may be more depth to these beliefs than prior research has explored. For instance, people may more strongly defend beliefs tied to romantic relationships that are *perceived* to be more legitimate (e.g., marriage) over other relationship types (e.g., cohabitating or "living apart together"). Beyond what has been outlined as committed relationship ideology, people may also defend specific beliefs surrounding the idealized role of family life, child-rearing, and child–parent relationships (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Eibach & Mock, 2012). It is also possible that the content of relationship ideology may change over time. For instance, in the distant past, marriage was more idealized for its economic advantages (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). However, for any changes to be sustained and for variations of relationship ideology to be defended, one can predict that these changes would have to fulfill similar psychological functions and needs such as exemplified in the research reviewed.

Implications of committed relationship ideology for researchers

If people are motivated to defend committed relationship ideology then they may also allow these beliefs to influence their lives and decisions in various contexts, including in the research domain. The media often depicts relationships and relationship research in biased ways that conform to relationship ideology (e.g., see DePaulo, 2006). There is also little reason to believe that relationship science researchers, journal editors, and ethical review board members are immune to these beliefs. Indeed, relationship ideology is evident in various examples of relationship research design and interpretation (DePaulo, 2014; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). For example, believing that marriage and committed romantic relationships are particularly beneficial or more valuable than other relationships types and points of view could affect the questions asked, the samples studied, the threshold of research quality, and the promotion of research results. Consistent with relationship ideology, relationship researchers may, with benign intentions, prioritize the study of marital and other serious romantic relationships over other relationship types and singles' experiences, in part, because they are perceived to be the closest relationships (i.e., most important). Such a rationale may partly explain why "most theory and research has been addressed to family relationships, particularly marital relationships, or to relationships that have the potential to end in marriage" (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p.153). Although research on marriage and premarital

relationships has been fruitful in psychology and may have partly been justified by marriage rates for much of the 20th century, there are also emerging costs. Notably, the neglect of other relationship types and points of view that are just as important to study (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). For example, there are over 100 million singles in America, and accordingly, there should be a much greater proliferation of research from a "singles' study" perspective than that currently exists (DePaulo, 2014). Given the prevalence of singles and increasing length of time that almost everyone experiences single life, the rationale for continuing the committed relationship research status quo, although previously consistent with statistical norms, may be increasingly interpreted as unfair and exclusionary.

To help assuage the potential influence of relationship ideology in the domain of relationship research, one possibility would be to take cues from the field of decision science (e.g., Milkman, Chugh, & Bazerman, 2009; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). For example, relationship researchers could by default first consider research questions from nonmarital standpoints, such as the perspective of singles and their various important relationships. Checklists could also be employed to ensure that research questions are not being studied on populations because they are merely convenient, perceived to be more important, perceived to have more benefits, or because they are believed to show expected phenomena more prominently (e.g., testing common but "weaker" relationships could also be informative). Researchers broadly interested in relationships could also avoid present bias tendencies by committing to these changes on an upcoming project instead of sometime in the distant future. Overall, such exercises may provide some useful pause when engaging in the research process. Rather than a final solution, they are perhaps a starting point. With the veil of committed relationship ideology more robustly removed, researchers may find a broader abundance of novel, worthwhile, and exciting relationship topics to study.

Funding

Notes

1. This song was popularized and most commonly associated with Dean Martin but was originally written by Russ Morgan, Larry Stock, and James Cavanaugh in 1944.
2. Although a different research question, some may be inclined to wonder how committed relationship beliefs first developed. There are a variety of conceivable origins (see DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Although an evolutionary perspective may be useful for explaining the origin of aspects of sexual reproduction and coupling, this perspective appears to poorly account for why current forms of relationship ideology are supported (e.g., see Pillsworth & Haselton, 2005).

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