

# Introduction

- A study on newlyweds and law students found that both groups acknowledged a **50% likelihood of divorce** for the **average marriage**.

(Baker & Emery, 1993)

- Both groups estimated a **0% likelihood** that **their own relationships** would end in divorce.
- Even after completing a course on family law, the law students did not change their estimates, which Baker and Emery attributed to the phenomenon of base rate fallacy.
- How else can these disparate estimates be resolved?

# Optimism in Romantic Relationships

- Perceptions of control are positively associated with level of optimism and is another factor to consider.

# Control Beliefs

- Multiple well-known measures of control, including relationship control, already exist. (Miller et al., 1986)
- However, they **do not distinguish between** what is reasonably **controllable** and **uncontrollable**.
- A measure tapping two independent dimensions of control (realistic and unrealistic) in daily life was created. (Zuckerman et al., 1996, 2004)
- Higher unrealistic control was related to **less emotional processing** and **greater risky sexual behavior**, which has potential implications for the domain of romantic relationships.
- Because of the dyadic nature of relationships (leading to many factors outside of one's control), assessing unrealistic control is truly important.

# Control Beliefs in Relationships

- We developed and refined the **Control Beliefs in Relationships** measure, based on items from the original Control Beliefs measure.
- The goal is to **establish the independence of unrealistic and realistic control beliefs in relationships** (UCBR and RCBR, respectively).
- Test two models:
  - Optimism in relationships as a mediator of the relationship between **UCBR** and perceived relationship stability.
  - Optimism in relationships as a mediator of the relationship between **RCBR** and perceived relationship stability.

# Current Study

- People report a lower likelihood of divorce for themselves than for the average person, even when aware of contradictory evidence.
- Perceived control and optimism might be linked to inaccurate estimations of whether one's relationship is likely to end.
- The current study examined optimism in relationships and realistic/unrealistic control beliefs in relationships as possible predictors of perceived relationship stability.

# Method

- 260 Ps were recruited from undergraduate classes at the University of Houston.
- Ps completed questionnaire packets on their own time in exchange for extra credit.
- Because of the topic of study, they had to be in dating or married relationships which had lasted a minimum of one month (an arbitrary cutoff).

# Participant Demographics

- **Age:** 18-58 years old ( $M=23.5$ ,  $SD=5.4$ )
- **Gender:** **Female (86.8%)**, Male (13.2%)
- **Classification:** Freshmen (3.5%), Sophomores (12%), **Juniors (43%)**, Seniors (37.6%), and Post-Bac (3.5%)
- **Ethnicity:** African American (15.1%), Asian (21.2%), **Caucasian (36.3%)**, Hispanic (18.2%), Mixed (5.8%), and “Other” (3.5%)
- **Sexual orientation:** **Heterosexual (94.2%)**, Homosexual (3.1%), and Bisexual (2.7%)

# Participant Relationship Demographics

- G **Relationship length** ranged from **1 month to 306 months** (25 years and 6 months)
- G **Average relationship length: 34.6 months**, or just under 3 years ( $SD = 40.9$  months)
- G **Past relationships** ranged from **0 to 25** intimate relationships that lasted 3 months or longer per participant
- G **Mean number of past relationships: 2.2** ( $SD = 2.5$ )

# Participant Relationship Demographics

- **Relationship status:** **dating (%)**, married (%), other (%)
- **Divorce history:** **never divorced (93.8%)**, divorced in past (6.2%)
- **Parental relationship status:** **still married (56.9%)**, divorced and remarried (16.9%), divorced and not remarried (11.9%), separated (3.9%), widowed (3.9%), “other” (6.5%)

# Measures

## ■ Optimism in Romantic Relationships

(Murray & Holmes, 1997)

- Ps rated likelihood of optimistic/idealistic items such as: “The passion my partner and I share remaining as intense as it is today.”

## ■ Control Beliefs in Relationships

(based on Zuckerman et al. (2004), modified for relationships)

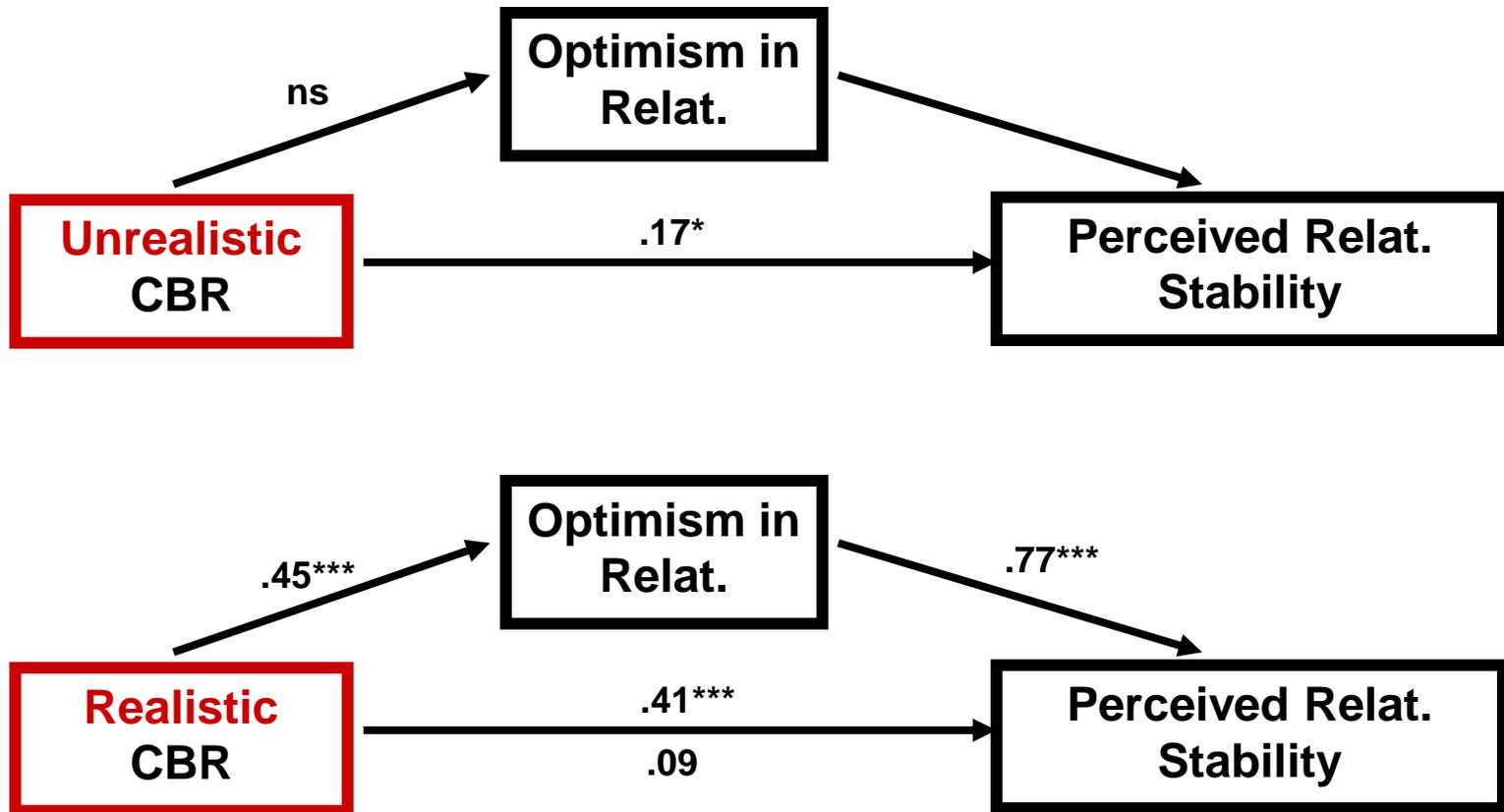
- Ps rated agreement with realistic and unrealistic control items such as: “When my partner disagrees with me, I can always change his or her mind.” and “I can show my partner that I am trustworthy.”

## ■ Perceived Relationship Stability

(created for this study)

- Ps rated likelihood of positive and negative events occurring in their relationships, such as: “Celebrating a 10-year anniversary” or “Experiencing irresolvable issues.”

# Results



\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .0001$ , ns = non-significant

# Discussion

- Optimism about one's relationship did not explain the link between UCBR and perceived relationship stability.
- People who are high in UCBR are not necessarily optimistic about their relationships, possibly in the face of daily evidence that they cannot control all aspects of their relationships.
- However, optimism about one's relationship fully mediated the link between RCBR and perceived relationship stability.
- This helps illustrate the independence of UCBR and RCBR as constructs and suggests that knowing what is and is not controllable in one's relationship can be vital to one's feelings toward the relationship and its survival.

# Limitations & Future Directions

- Current study was cross-sectional and did not follow-up at future time points to determine actual relationship survival.
- Future research should examine couples, what control differences exist between married and dating relationships, and what health outcomes UCBR and RCBR predict.
- Studies on control beliefs in relationships, what relationship outcomes they predict, and how the beliefs can be changed would be potentially beneficial to those who provide relationship counseling.

# References

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