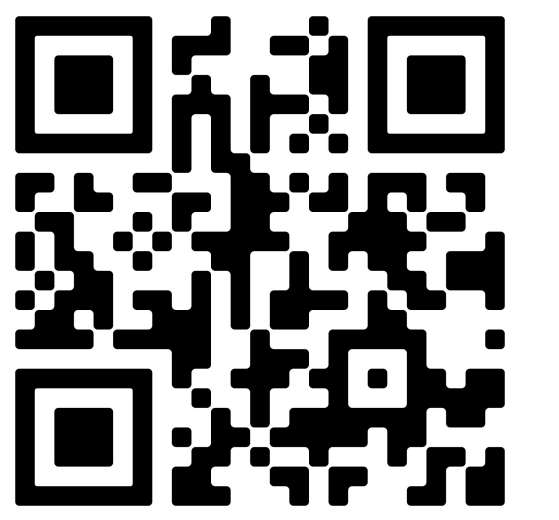# Primal World Beliefs and Mental Simulation about Romantic Relationships: Implications for Relationship Quality

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ABSTRACT

Primal world beliefs (primals) refer to a person's fundamental beliefs about the world. The current research examined the implications of the *enticing* primal on mental simulation of future relationship events and romantic relationship quality. This study was a correlational study that employed couples (n = 116) who completed questionnaires regarding their romantic partner. The results of this study suggest that perceiving the world as enticing predicted simulating a future characterized by partner acceptance, which, in turn, predicted more confidence in partners' positive regard, satisfaction, and commitment. These results extend prior work regarding primal world beliefs because they suggest that world beliefs have important implications for relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. Practical and theoretical implications will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

- Primal world beliefs (or primals) are beliefs about the characteristics of the world (Clifton et al., 2019).
- Primals may be important to study because beliefs about the world may inform many judgments and actions in everyday life.
- The primal dimension, *enticing*, reflects whether people see the world as dull and unattractive versus a fascinating and captivating experience filled with beauty.
- Seeing the world as enticing is related to extraversion, engagement with life, positive emotion, and gratitude (Clifton et al., 2019).
- The impact of enticing primals on close relationships has not received attention.
- The present study tests the hypothesis that enticing primals will predict *mental simulations*, autobiographical simulations of hypothetical future events, characterized by interpersonal acceptance, which will predict greater perceived partner regard.
  - An example of a mental simulation would be if you imagined how you would approach a conversation you were planning to have with your partner in the future and considered how they would respond to various openings you could use.
- When engaging in mental simulations of the future, people who score high on enticing primals may be more inclined to imagine positive experiences, consistent with their general beliefs that the world is full of potential rewards.
- In turn, those who tend to simulate a future characterized by interpersonal acceptance may have more confidence in their romantic partner's positive regard.
  - Prior research shows that mental simulations can substitute for actual experience, impacting people's current emotions, motivations, and judgments(Gaessera et al., 2014; Kappes & Morewedge, 2016).
- This is an important effect to study given the impact of perceived partner regard on romantic relationship satisfaction (Gaucher et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2000).
- Prior research has shown that self-esteem predicts perceived regard in relationships (Murray et al., 2000). Thus, in the current research, we controlled for self-esteem.
- We expect that beliefs about the world, and the mental simulations they engender, can shape perceived regard independently of beliefs about the self.

METHODS

Participants
- This study used 116 romantic couples (*M* age = 32 years; *SD* = 10.90).
- Participants were recruited through newspaper advertisements, flyers posted in the community, and email solicitations.

Demographics
- 46% men, 52% women & 2% non-binary.
- 70% White, 17% Asian/Asian American, 10% Black/African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino American, &7% indicating other identities.

Measures
- *Enticing Primals:* Participants completed the PI-99 (Clifton et al., 2019). For the purposes of this study, only measures relating to enticing primals (28-items) were used in analysis. Participants responded using 7-point response scales (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree; α = .93; "There is beauty everywhere, no matter where we look.").
- *Self-Esteem:* Participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) using 7-point response scales (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree; α = .90; "I feel that I have a number of good qualities").
- *Tendency to Simulate Acceptance:* Participants were asked to imagine and describe an experience with their partner that could happen in the future. They then rated their feelings of acceptance during this experience on a 5-point scale (1: not at all; 5: extremely).
- *Frequency of Simulating Partner Acceptance:* Participants rated the frequency with which they imagine future events in which their partner was accepting using a 5-point response scale (1: never; 5: almost all the time).
- *Perceived Regard:* Participants completed an adapted version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure perceived regard. Items were completed using the same 7-point response scales (α = .81; "He/she feels that I have a number of good qualities").
- *Partner Evaluation*. Participants completed a five-item scale based on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale measuring global evaluation of partners (α = .78, "[My partner] has a number of good qualities").

Procedures
- Participants completed the measures described on an online questionnaire.

RESULTS

Multilevel models were used to test predictions while modeling participants as nested within dyads. Analyses controlled for the partner's actual evaluation of the participant. Results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mediation model for relationship between enticing primals and perceived partner regard.
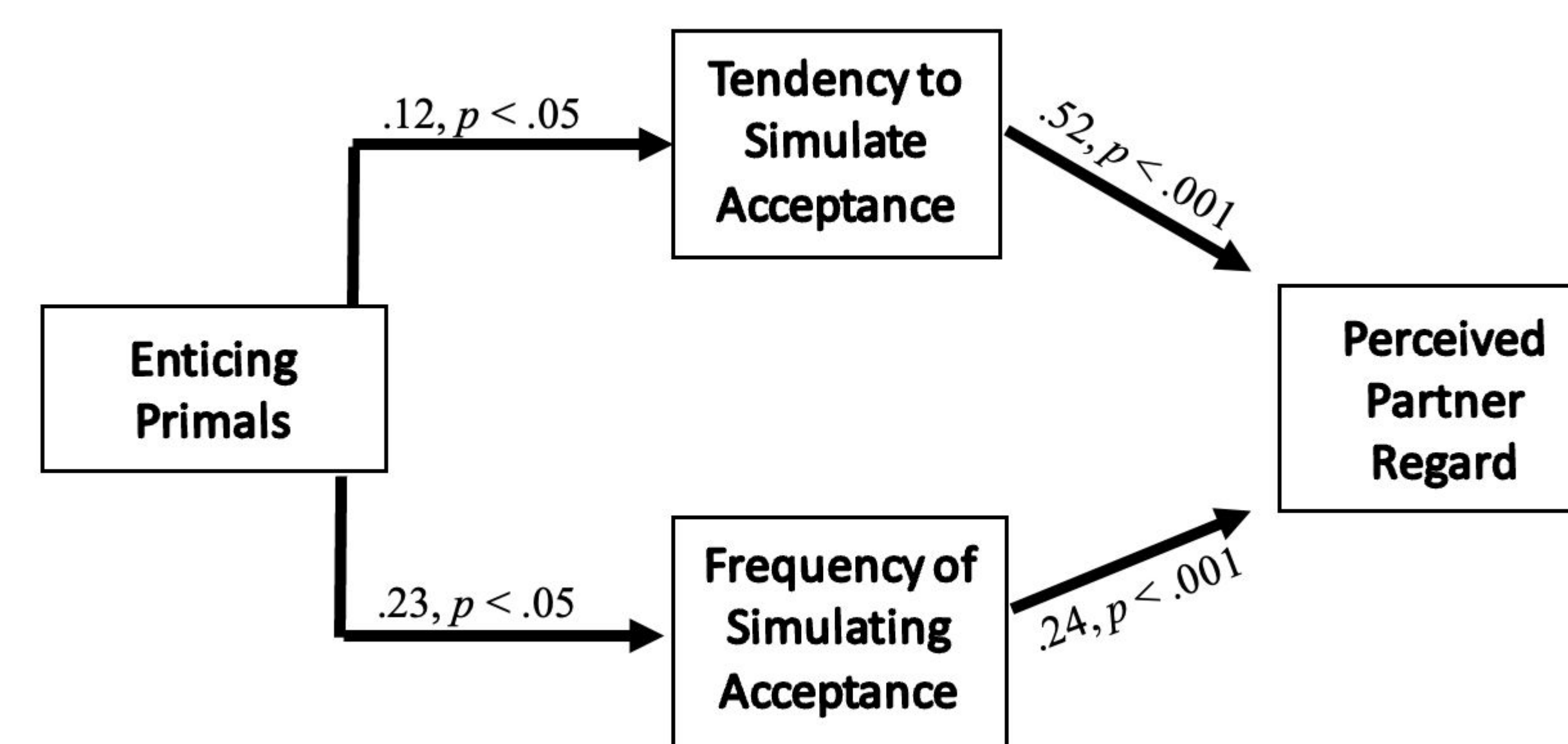
Note. Coefficients are standardized.

Enticing Primals → Tendency to Simulate Partner Acceptance → Perceived Partner Regard
95% CL: .005, .09
Enticing Primals → Frequency of Simulating Partner Acceptance → Perceived Partner Regard
95% CL: .01, .12

DISCUSSION

- When asking participants to simulate a specific future event, enticing primals predicted the tendency to simulate future events characterized by partner acceptance.
- Enticing primals also predicted the frequency of simulating future relationship events characterized by acceptance.
- The tendency to simulate partner acceptance and the frequency of simulating partner acceptance predicted perceived partner regard while statistically controlling for the partner's actual evaluation and self-esteem.
- This research provides novel evidence that enticing primals may affect relationship quality by altering simulations of interpersonal acceptance.
- These results support prior arguments that mental simulations may often function like actual experiences when guiding people's judgments (Kappes & Morewedge, 2016).
- Given the importance of perceived regard for romantic relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 2000), an important factor for relationship quality, these results have important implications for the future exploration of enticing primals as an indirect predictor of relationship quality.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the extent to which enticing primals predict change in episodic simulations and relationship quality overtime.
- Future interventions could attempt to increase enticing primals, which may boost episodic simulations characterized by positive emotion.
- Future interventions could attempt to increase the frequency of positive episodic simulations, which could positively impact relationship quality.
- Given the correlation between low scores on enticing primals and depression (Clifton et al., 2019) future research should control for depression to ensure it does not act as a third variable that explains the effects of the enticing primals on relationship quality

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