ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Romantic Relationship and Partner Schemas: Concepts Associated with a Positive Valence

Esquemas de Relación y de Pareja Romántica: Conceptos Asociados a la Valencia Positiva

Esquemas de Relacionamento e de Parceiro Romântico: Conceitos Associados à Valência Positiva

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Abstract
This study identifies concepts associated with positive valence of romantic relationship and partner, in order to characterize the schemas about these two phenomena. Participants ($N = 158$, 134 women) were asked to write about the positive aspects of their relationship and their partner. These reports were subjected to lexical and content analysis. Nineteen categories emerged, related to the concepts that compose the relationship schema, and 21 others related to the partner. Words and categories most frequently mentioned to characterize positive aspects of the relationship were companionship and trust, and to characterize positive aspects of the partner were caring and affectionate. There was recurrence in words and categories used among participants, indicating consensus about which aspects are positive in a relationship and a romantic partner. Differences in relationship satisfaction levels between those who mentioned and those who did not mention categories created from the reports were tested. Individuals who mentioned categories as companionship, affection, respect, and dialogue showed higher levels of satisfaction than those who did not mention these categories. The results suggest that the schemes can provide indicators of satisfaction with the relationship.

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Resumen

Este estudio identifica conceptos asociados con la valencia positiva sobre relación romántica y pareja, para caracterizar los esquemas sobre estos dos fenómenos. Los participantes ($N = 158$, 134 mujeres) fueron invitados a escribir sobre los aspectos positivos de la relación y de la pareja. Las respuestas fueron sometidas a análisis léxico y de contenido. Surgieron 19 categorías con respecto a los conceptos que conforman el esquema de relación amorosa; y 21 de la pareja. Las palabras y categorías mencionadas con mayor frecuencia para caracterizar aspectos positivos de la relación fueron compañerismo y confianza; para caracterizar los aspectos positivos de la pareja, fueron cuidadosos y afectuosos. Hubo recurrencia en las palabras y categorías utilizadas por los participantes, lo que indica un consenso sobre los aspectos positivos de la relación y la pareja. También se examinaron las diferencias en el nivel de satisfacción con la relación entre los participantes que citaron y los que no citaron las categorías. Las personas que mencionaron categorías como compañerismo, afecto, respeto y diálogo tuvieron mayores niveles de satisfacción que aquellas que no mencionaron estas categorías. Los resultados sugieren que los esquemas pueden proporcionar indicadores de satisfacción en la relación.

Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo identificar conceitos associados a cargas afetivas positivas sobre relacionamento amoroso e sobre parceiros amorosos, a fim de mapear os esquemas sobre esses dois fenômenos. Aos participantes ($N = 158$, sendo 134 mulheres) foi solicitado que escrevessem sobre aspectos positivos do relacionamento e do parceiro. As respostas foram submetidas a análises lexical e de conteúdo. Emergiram 19 categorias referentes a conceitos que compõem o esquema de relacionamento amoroso; e 21, do parceiro. As palavras e categorias mencionadas com mais frequência para caracterizar aspectos positivos do relacionamento foram companheirismo e confiança; para caracterizar aspectos positivos do parceiro, foram cuidadoso e afetuoso. Houve recorrência nas palavras e categorias utilizadas pelos participantes, indicando consenso sobre aspectos positivos do relacionamento e do parceiro. Também foram testadas diferenças do nível de satisfação com o relacionamento entre os participantes que citaram e os que não citaram as categorias. Indivíduos que mencionaram categorias como companheirismo, afeto, respeito e diálogo apresentaram maiores níveis de satisfação do que aqueles que não mencionaram essas categorias. Os resultados sugerem que os esquemas podem fornecer indicadores da satisfação com o relacionamento.

Schema could be understood as the data structure that represents generic concepts stored in the memory of an individual (Rumelhart 2018). Thus, schemas (or schemata) are the building blocks of cognition, and are used by individuals to organize their own

knowledge about the social world. Some of the most important schemas used by people within their romantic lives are the romantic relationships and partners schemas. Partner schemas are the cognitive generalizations (developed by past experience) that arrange and orient the processing of information related to the romantic partner (Whisman and Delinsky 2002). The romantic relationship schema, similarly, would be understood as cognitive generalizations that organize and guide the processing of information pertinent to the relationship, and would be closely associated with the partner schema, since it is through the experience with the romantic partner that the romantic relationship schema develops. Still, partner and relationship schemas would be part of a larger picture: the general relationship schema (Baldwin 1992). Relationship and partner schemas can act as filters for perception and interpretation of new events, thoughts, and memories about aspects of love life. Therefore, knowing the schemas about relationships and partners associated with positive valence could contribute to understanding what leads people to be satisfied in their relationships.

Schemas help in the attribution of meaning to an event and guide the emotional and behavioral responses to external or internal stimuli. They may, for example, be predictors of future behavior by guiding social attitudes (Heim et al. 2018). Identifying relationship and partner schemas can contribute to the characterization of the content network associated with romantic life. This network of content is evoked in countless events related to the relationship, for instance, to make assessments about the relationship (e.g., judgment about satisfaction with one's relationship) or to perceive and interpret new events (e.g., causal attribution of partner behavior). This study aimed to map, in an exploratory and inductive way, concepts linked to positive valence on romantic relationship and partner schemes in a sample of Brazilians.

Greenwald et al. (2002) postulate three principles governing cognitive schemas. The first principle states that when two concepts are linked to a third concept (called shared first-order link), a link between the first two tends to be formed, or the association between the first two tends to be strengthened. When, for example, the concept of a romantic partner is associated with other concepts (e.g., an affectionate partner, a "partner-companion"), and these are in turn associated with attribute concepts with positive valence (e.g., affectionate-positive; companion-positive), there tends to be a link between the concept of partner and the attribute of positive valence (partner-positive). Thus, a positive attitude towards the partner is formed, since attitude can be defined as an association between an object or social group concept, and an attribute concept with positive or negative valence (Greenwald et al. 2002).

The second principle, called the imbalance-dissonance principle, postulates situations in which the first principle does not occur (Greenwald et al. 2002). It will not tend to form an association between two concepts that share a link with a third concept when these two concepts have fewer first-order shared links than expected by chance (something called bipolar-opposed). Thus, although an individual maintains some concepts associated with negative valence (e.g., a lazy-partner, lazy-negative) in his or her own partner's schema, the concept of partner will not be associated with a negative valence if there are few associations with other concepts also associated with a negative valence.

The third principle deals with the way in which people solve cognitive dissonances, called differentiation (Greenwald et al. 2002). Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual perceives incoherence (dissonance) between cognitions (see Cooper 2019) (e.g., the individual who includes in the romantic partner schema concepts such as "affectionate" and "kind," and also "perceives the partner behaving rudely"). A concept is called pressured when it is forced (through the balance-consistency principle) to develop links between opposing poles (positive vs. negative), so the pressured concept tends to divide itself into sub-concepts, thus allowing each of these sub-concepts to associate with one of the poles. The concept of a romantic partner, if the individual experiences cognitive dissonance, would be forced to split up, for example, into: A loving partner in most of the time, and a loving partner when very tired and stressed with his/her work. Returning, thus, to cognitive consonance.

In fact, a number of studies have shown that individuals often minimize negative events in their romantic relationships by making so-called benevolent cognitions in the face of negative spouse behaviors (Karney 2015; McNulty et al. 2008). Thus, by assigning the negative behavior of the spouse to a temporary event with an external cause to the spouse (e.g., my spouse was aggressive today because his boss stressed him out), the concept of the relationship with the spouse remains positive, that is, the individual continues to maintain a positive attitude towards their relationship, remaining satisfied with it. Karney et al. (2001) discovered that overall assessments of the relationship tend to remain positive, even in the face of specific negative events (possible causes of cognitive dissonance), when individuals perform positive attributions of responsibility (e.g., they do not blame their partner for a negative event).

The schemas associated with the romantic relationship and partner thus play an important role in the evaluation of relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction with the romantic relationship can be defined as an attitude towards the partner and the relationship (Roach et al. 1981). In cognitive terms, satisfaction stems from the associations between the concepts of "romantic relationship" and "romantic partner" and attribute concepts with positive or negative valence. Given that individuals can maintain positive and negative attitudes simultaneously towards the same social object (Newby-Clark et al. 2002), the more frequent and stronger the associations between the concepts of romantic relationships and partners and one of the valence poles (positive vs. negative), the stronger the attitude towards the relationship/partner, and, therefore, the greater the satisfaction.

In this sense, Wilde and Dozois (2018) found associations between partner schema and relationship satisfaction. Partner schemas containing concepts which are highly associated with a negative valence and poorly associated with a positive valence negatively explained part of the variance of relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Whisman and Delinsky (2002) found that marital satisfaction was negatively explained by associations of negative concepts to the partner, and positively by associations of positive concepts to the partner. Jose et al. (2010) found that individuals who are satisfied with their own relationship rated positive words as more characteristic descriptors of their partner than dissatisfied individuals; dissatisfied individuals rated negative words as more characteristic descriptors of their partner than satisfied individuals. Scinta and Gable (2007) found that the strength of automatic associations

between partner and negative valence words predict negatively satisfaction with the relationship.

Other studies have focused on personal schemas developed in childhood that could negatively impact the romantic life of an adult person (Dumitrescu and Rusu 2012; Paim et al. 2012; Scribel et al. 2007). Dumitrescu and Rusu, for example, have observed that dysfunctional initial schemas (e.g., the perception that the partner is not able to provide emotional support or protection, or that affective needs are never adequately addressed) negatively predict satisfaction with the relationship.

Despite the importance of social schemas in an individual's romantic life, studies that investigate actual romantic relationship and partner schemas are relatively rare. Furthermore, the instruments employed in studies to measure such schemas use previously defined concepts (e.g., Jose et al. 2010; Rowley 1995; Whisman and Delinsky 2002; Wilde and Dozois 2018). Although it presents advantages, this method conditions the set of concepts of the researched schemas to the screening of the researchers.

An alternative that could help overcome this limitation would be to ask participants to describe what they think about a given schema (e.g., romantic relationship), thus mapping central and accessible concepts of the investigated schema. Research in this way already have been conducted to investigate schemes (e.g., Boxer et al. 2015; Fletcher et al. 1999). However, reports of studies that have investigated both the actual relationship and the partner scheme are unknown. In addition, schemas are intrinsically related to culture, as they comprise knowledge and experiences in a given context (Rumelhart and Norman 1985). Therefore, a necessary first step in investigating relationship and partner schemes is to identify concepts associated with these schemas using an exploratory and inductive method and with individuals within a specific culture.

The Present Study

The present study aims to identify concepts associated with positive valence of romantic relationship and partner, in order to characterize the schemas about these two phenomena. Its specific objectives were as follows: (1) to characterize concepts associated with positive valence on one's own romantic relationship; (2) to characterize concepts associated with positive valence on the romantic partner; (3) to verify associations between these concepts and the gender of the participants; (4) to verify differences in romantic relationship satisfaction levels between those who shared certain concepts or not.

To achieve these objectives, a mixed method study was delineated. A qualitative approach (with an exploratory and descriptive scope) was used to achieve the first two specific objectives, and a quantitative method (to investigate the associations between the variables) was used to achieve the last two specific objectives. The mixed method is recommended when there is scarce literature available on the topic studied (Creswell and Clark 2018). Indeed, until now and with this approach, studies carried out in Brazil that investigated concepts that make up the relationship/partner schemas were unknown.

Method

Participants

This study included 158 heterosexual adults who were in a romantic relationship and cohabited with their partners, 134 women and 24 men. The mean age was 37.6 years (SD = 11.4), minimum of 19 and maximum of 73 years. Regarding financial income, the average individual income was BRL 6481.30 (SD = 7719.01), approximately US$ 1851.80, and the average per capita household income was BRL 4644.90 (SD = 3804.46), approximately US$ 1327.11. Regarding the level of education, 68.8% answered that they were attending or had completed a postgraduate course (35.0% referring to higher education specialization, 17.2% to a master's degree, and 16.6% to a PhD), 26.1% answered that they were attending or had completed higher education, and, finally, 5.10% attended elementary or high school. Most of the participants came from the southeast (68.2%) and south (24.9%) regions of Brazil, the others came from the midwest (3.82%) and northeast (3.17%) regions. In relation to the romantic relationship, the average relationship time was 10.9 years (SD = 10.6), ranging from a minimum of 3 months to a maximum of 51 years. Of the total number of participants, 38% said they were legally and religiously married, 19.6% were legally married, 1.3% were religiously married, and 41.1% said they live in an unmarried union. The mean age of the partner was 39.9 years (SD = 12.9). Just over half of the participants had children—91 (57.6%) of them—with the mean number of children being 1.82 (SD = 0.85).

Instruments

The data were collected through an online questionnaire, made available on the internet, containing open-ended questions, in other words, discursive responses, as well as sociodemographic questions. The following questions were asked to access concepts associated with positive valence of (1) relationship schemas (referred to here as the "positive aspects of the relationship"): "What makes your relationship good?" And "What are the characteristics of your relationship that you most appreciate?"; and (2) partner schemas (referred to here as the "positive aspects of the partner"): "What makes you consider your partner a good partner?" and "What characteristics of your partner do you care about?". Below the questions, there was a space for the participants to write their answers. The questionnaire also contained a scale to measure the individual's satisfaction with the romantic relationship.

The Romantic Relationship Satisfaction Level Scale (ENSRA, Natividade et al. 2019) is a Brazilian version of the scale developed by Rusbult et al. (1998). The instrument contains five affirmative items to be answered on a 9-point agreement scale, such that 0 = *Do not agree at all*, and 8 = *Agree completely*; the higher the scores, the greater the satisfaction with the romantic relationship. For example: "Our relationship makes me happy." In the original version, from Rusbult et al., the scale presented an alpha coefficient of .95. In this study, the alpha coefficient was .91. The romantic relationship satisfaction level "refers to the positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship" (Rusbult et al., p. 359). This scale was used because, besides being used worldwide to access relationship satisfaction, it is also in tune with the definition

of relationship satisfaction adopted in this study (i.e., satisfaction in the romantic relationship as an attitude towards the relationship with the romantic partner, according to Roach et al. (1981). The confirmatory factor analysis for Brazilian version supported the adequacy of one-factor structure [DWLS estimator: $\chi^2 = 6.35$; df = 5; $p = .27$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.02; SRMR = 0.03], as pointed by the theoretical model (Rusbult et al.). Still, in the scale validation study for the Brazilian population, Natividade et al. reported that ENSRA presents evidence based on content, structure, and relationships with other variables, showing, for example, a strong correlation with other scale that measures the same construct, and with other constructs theoretically related.

Procedures

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through invitations on social networks. In the invitation to participate, researchers requested the participation of adults, married or unmarried, living in the same house as their partner. Those who accepted to participate should click on the link from the address provided in the invitation and were directed to the questionnaire. From the answers obtained, the adult heterosexual who reported living with the partner were selected for this study.

Data Analysis

Firstly, the answers to the two open questions regarding the positive aspects of the relationship and the two relating to the positive aspects of the partner were grouped and formed, respectively, two analysis corpora. Then, a preliminary lexical analysis of each *corpus* was performed, through the frequency of words in lemmatized form. Then, a content analysis was carried out in each *corpus*, as proposed by Bardin (2016). The categories emerged from the answers with similar meanings between them, being, therefore, a semantic criterion of categorization. Only categories that were mentioned by at least two participants were maintained. Categories with similar meanings were agglutinated, seeking to keep these mutually exclusive, homogeneous, and exhaustive, in addition to maintaining a balance between their generality and specificity. The themes, that is, the chosen registration units, were cut from the textual *corpus* and allocated in the corresponding category. Two independent researchers categorized the material, and in case of disagreement between them, a third researcher was consulted.

Homogeneity tests (chi-square, or Fisher's exact test when the expected frequency was less than five) were performed to verify (1) the association between the gender of the participant and the words they mentioned (considering only words with an absolute frequency greater than 20 in the *corpus* of analysis), and (2) the association between the gender of the participant and the categories they mentioned, resulting from the content analysis (considering only the categories with a frequency greater than 10% of the sample). In addition, a normality test was performed on the satisfaction variable with the relationship. Mann-Whitney U tests were then performed to verify (1) the mean differences in satisfaction with the relationship

between those who did and those who did not mention the categories, and (2) the difference between men and women in satisfaction levels with their romantic relationship. In these analyzes, only categories with a frequency of participants greater than 10% of the sample (16 participants) were considered.

Ethics

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings (protocol number 2.803.433). All ethical principles outlined in the National Health Council resolutions were followed.

Results

Positive Aspects of the Relationship

In order to verify the words most used by the participants to characterize the positive aspects of the relationship, the researchers counted the number of references of the words in the textual *corpus* related to this topic. The word most often referenced by the participants was "companionship" (frequency of the word, $f = 73$). Other words with more than 20 references were "complicity" ($f = 43$), "respect" ($f = 38$), "trust" ($f = 33$), "friendship" $f = 24$), "much" ($f = 22$), "together" ($f = 21$), and "affection" ($f = 21$).

In order to verify if the words were being referenced between men and women with a similar frequency, tests of association between the number of times the word was referenced and the gender of the participants were performed. The chi-square test (with Yates's correction) indicated an association between individuals who referenced the word "companionship," χ^2 (1, $N = 158$) = 4.16, $p = .041$, $V = .18$, and "complicity," χ^2 (1, $N = 158$) = 4.03, $p = .04$, $V = .18$ and their gender. Women proportionately mentioned the words "companionship" (50% of women mentioned that word) and "complicity" (30.6%) more frequently than men (25% and 8.3%, respectively). The other words did not present a statistically significant association with the gender of the participants.

Regarding content analysis, a total of 766 registration units (words/expressions) characterizing positive aspects of the relationship were observed. From the similarity of meaning, 91.8% of the total were grouped in registration units in 19 categories. The categories were named as follows: Admiration; Affection; Affinity; Care; Companionship; Dialogue; Family building; Friendship; Future plans; Good humor; Harmony; Individuality; Intimacy; Nothing; Resolving conflicts; Respect; Sex; Stability; Trust. Table 1 shows the categories, the frequency of participants who mentioned them, their definitions, and examples of subjects that composed them. The Companionship category was the most frequently mentioned, with 70.9% of the participants mentioning it. Other categories mentioned by more than 20% of the participants were the following: Trust (34.2%), Affection (31%), Respect (28.5%), and Care (25.9%). In order to test associations between having mentioned a category and the gender of the participant, chi-square tests were performed. There was no association between gender and the mentioning of the categories.

Table 1 Categories, participant frequencies, descriptions, and examples of words/expressions relating to the positive aspects of the relationship

Categories	f (%)	Description	Examples of words/expressions
Companionship	70.9	Enjoy each other's company.	Companionship; complicity.
Trust	34.2	Trust and feeling security in the partner.	Trust; loyalty; sincerity; fidelity.
Affection	31.0	Affective exchanges between the couple.	Care; tenderness; affection; love.
Respect	28.5	To respect and being respected.	Respect; understanding; empathy.
Care	25.9	Feeling cared for by the partner.	Supportive; attentive; the care between us.
Friendship	16.5	Relationship based on friendship.	Friendship; we are very good friends.
Affinity	16.5	Realizing similarities with the partner.	We have the same thoughts.
Good humor	12.7	Having good humor, experiencing positive affects.	Good humor; joy.
Harmony	12.7	Tranquility in the relationship.	It's a quiet, peaceful relationship.
Stability	12.0	Having a safe and stable relationship.	Safety; stability.
Future plans	10.8	Having future plans which are shared with the partner.	Common plans; willingness to do many things together.
Dialogue	10.1	Sharing personal thoughts.	Openness to dialogue; good communication.
Admiration	8.9	Feelings of admiration and pride of and from the partner.	Mutual admiration; when I realize how much my partner values me.
Family building	8.2	Reference to family or family roles.	Our children; having a participating father to raise my daughter.
Sex	8.2	Sexual attraction, sex.	Good sex; physical attraction.
Conflict resolution	6.3	Ability to resolve conflicts	We never go to sleep without solving a fight; openness to forgiveness.
Intimacy	5.7	Being intimate with the partner.	Intimacy; exchange of intimacies.
Individuality	3.2	Expressing yourself as you wish.	Feeling free.
Nothing	1.3	Stating that the relationship has no positive aspects.	None; nothing.

f = percentage of participants who mentioned the category

Positive Aspects of the Partner

In order to verify the most frequently mentioned words to characterize the positive aspects of the partner, the frequency of occurrence of the words in the textual *corpus* referring to this topic was computed. The word most frequently mentioned by the participants was "good" $(f = 33)$. Other words with more than 20 references were "affectionate" $(f = 32)$, "companion" $(f = 23)$, "humor" $(f = 23)$, and "intelligence" $(f = 21)$.

Homogeneity tests were performed to verify whether men and women have the same proportions of mentioning words. Fisher's exact test indicated an association between references to the word "affectionate" and the gender of the participants $(p = .04)$. The chi-square test (with Yates's correction) indicated an association between

references to the word "good" and the gender of the participants, χ^2 (1, $N = 158$) = 6.05, $p = .01$, $V = .22$. Women mentioned the words "affectionate" (23.1% of women mentioned that word) and "good" (24.6%) more often than men did (4.17% and 0%, respectively). The other words did not present a statistically significant association with the gender of the participants.

Regarding content analysis, the two answers to the questions about the positive aspects of the partner generated 801 registration units, of which 95.6% were coded in 21 categories. The categories were named as follows: Affectionate; Caring; Companion; Everything; Extroverted; Family; Friend; Good heart; Good humored; Hard worker; Homely; Honesty; Intelligent; Loyalty; Optimism; Peaceful; Physical aspects; Respectful; Sex; Similarity between partners; Youth. The category, the frequency of participants who mentioned them, their definitions, and examples of themes that composed them can be found in Table 2. The Caring category was the most frequently mentioned, being listed by 40.5% of the participants. Other categories which were mentioned by more than 20% of participants were the following: Affectionate (35.4%); Companion (33.5%); Hard worker (31.6%); Honesty (25.9%), Good humored (24.1%), Loyalty (22.8%), and Intelligent (20.9%).

In order to verify the association between the citation of the categories and the gender of the participants, homogeneity tests were performed. The chi-square test (with Yates's correction) indicated an association between those who mentioned the Caring category and the gender of the participants, χ^2 (1, $N = 158$) = 6.67, $p = .01$, $V = .21$. The other categories did not present a statistically significant association with gender.

Relationship Between Categories and Relationship Satisfaction

In order to verify if the relationship satisfaction variable had a normal distribution, a Kolmogoriv-Smirnov test was performed and there was no normality in the data, D (158) = 0.17; $p < 0.001$. Then, differences in satisfaction with the relationship between those who mentioned and those who did not mention each of the 12 categories most often (frequency greater than 10%) on the positive aspects of the relationship were examined through a nonparametric test. The Mann-Whitney U test showed a significant difference in levels of satisfaction with the relationship between those who mentioned the Companionship category (Mdn = 7.00, $n = 112$) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 5.80, $n = 46$), $U = 1536.5$, $z = -3.99$, $p < .001$, $r = .32$, between those who mentioned the Affection category (Mdn = 7.00, $n = 49$) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 6.80, $n = 109$), $U = 2119.5$, $z = -2.08$, $p = .04$, $r = .17$, between who mentioned the Respect category (Mdn = 7.40, $n = 45$) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 6.60, $n = 113$), $U = 1770$, $z = -2.98$, $p = .003$, $r = .24$, between those who mentioned the Dialogue category (Mdn = 7.60, $n = 16$) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 6.80, $n = 142$), $U = 727$, $z = -2.36$, $p = .02$, $r = .19$.

Next, differences in satisfaction with the relationship between those who mentioned and those who did not mention each of the 13 categories with the highest frequency (frequency greater than 10%) on the positive aspects of the partner were tested. The Mann-Whitney U test showed a significant difference in relationship satisfaction levels between those who mentioned the Companion category (Mdn = 7.00, $n = 53$) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 6.80, $n = 105$), $U = 2224.5$, $z = -2.06$, $p = .040$, $r = .16$, and among those who mentioned the Affectionate

Table 2 Categories, participant frequencies, descriptions, and examples of words/expressions relating to the positive aspects of the partner

Categories	f (%)	Description	Examples of words/expressions
Caring	40.5	Caring for and helping the partner.	Take good care of me, being helpful and considerate.
Affectionate	35.4	Showing love, affection.	Loving; affectionate
Companion	33.5	Keeping company or going along with the partner.	Companion; accomplice.
Hard worker	31.6	Being a hard working person.	Hard working; works tirelessly.
Honesty	25.9	Being trustworthy, honest.	Honesty, trustworthy.
Good humored	24.1	Being good humored and having cheerful feelings.	Cheerful, good humor.
Loyalty	22.8	Commitment to maintaining a romantic relationship	Commitment to our relationship; loyalty; true.
Intelligent	20.9	Characteristic of an intelligent person.	Intelligent; very clever.
Respectful	19.6	Being considerate to the others.	Respectful; understanding.
Good heart	19.0	Being generous, benevolent.	Gentle; generous; kind.
Peaceful	13.9	Being a calm, serene, patient person.	Patient; quiet; serenity.
Friend	12.7	Being a friend, having friendship bonds.	Friend, friendship.
Family	12.7	Reference to family and family roles.	A wonderful mother; good paternal reference.
Physical aspects	7.0	Physical quality of the individual.	Physical beauty; pretty; ass.
Optimism	7.0	Willingness to see the positive side of things.	Optimism; positive thinking.
Sex	6.3	Reference to sex or sexuality.	Sex; sexually attracts me.
Similarity between partners	5.7	Perception of common characteristics between the couple.	Aligned thoughts; we have a lot of things in common.
Extroverted	2.5	Manifestation of extroversion traits.	Sociable, extroverted.
Youth	2.5	Characteristic of young individuals.	Youth; joviality in their ideas.
Homely	1.9	Very fond of staying at home.	Homely person.
Everything	1.3	Affirmation that all aspects of the spouse are positive.	All; I do not know what to say, but basically everything.

f = percentage of participants who mentioned the category

category (Mdn = 7.0, n = 56) and those who did not mention it (Mdn = 6.60, n = 102), U = 2250.5, z = − 2.21, p = .03, r = .18.

Finally, the differences between men and women regarding the satisfaction levels with the romantic relationship were tested. The Mann-Whitney U test did not show a significant difference in satisfaction levels between men (Mdn = 6.90, n = 24) and women (Mdn = 7.00, n = 134), U = 1411, z = − 0.96, p = .34, r = .08.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to identify concepts of romantic relationship and partner associated with the positive valence concept, in order to characterize the schemas about these two phenomena. For this purpose, the discursive responses of married or cohabiting couples describing their own relationships were used. The responses generated 766 units of analysis related to the positive aspects of the relationship, of which 91.8% were included in 19 thematic categories; and 801 units of analysis related to the positive aspects of the love partner, such that 95.6% of this total were grouped into 21 categories.

Many of the words and categories mentioned to characterize the positive aspects of the relationship were also used to characterize the positive aspects of the partner, e.g., companionship, companion; care, caring; friendship, friend; affection, affectionate. The relationship and partner schemas were similar, such that there was recurrence in the words and categories used by the participants to characterize the two phenomena. This was expected since the schema of love relationship occurs through living with the romantic partner; therefore, it was expected that both schemas (relationship and partner) were coherent with each other, that is, presenting common nuclei between them (for a review on social cognition, see Greifeneder et al. 2018).

The concepts associated with the positive aspects of the romantic relationship and partner surveyed in this study are broadly in line with those found in national and international ideal relationship and partner schemes studies. Buss and Barnes (1986) found that the 10 most valued characteristics in a romantic partner are: being a good companion, considerate, honest, affectionate, dependable, intelligent, kind, understanding, interesting to talk to, and loyal. Fletcher et al. (1999) found that the concepts most often associated with ideal partner schemes were attractive, intelligent, good sense of humor, considerate, and outgoing. Those often associated with the ideal relationship scheme were honest, in love, good communication, caring, and understanding (Fletcher et al. 1999). Yet, in a qualitative exploratory research, more than half of all participants' responses to partner preference questions referred to five characteristic themes: care, likeability, conscientiousness, trust, and intelligence (Boxer et al. 2015). In Brazil, Féres-Carneiro (1997) also observed that for heterosexual men and women, the most valued qualities for romantic partners are the following: loyalty, companionship, uprightness, affection, and passion. These same characteristics were also found in the present study indicating that, in general, individuals share their actual and ideal partner and relationship schemas, at least the part associated with positive valences. The similarity of actual and ideal partner/relationship characteristics can be explained by the fact that individuals use ideal partner/relationship scheme to evaluate their actual relationships and partners (Fletcher et al. 2000); so it is expected that there will be some overlap in concepts in the ideal and actual relationship/partner scheme. In addition, this result seems to indicate that there is some consensus on what aspects are positive in a relationship and a partner.

The concept of companionship was shown in the romantic relationship and partner schema for most participants. In fact, this was one of the concepts most strongly associated with the relationship (the words "companionship" and "complicity" obtained, respectively, 73 and 43 occurrences in the textual *corpus*, and the Companionship category was mentioned by 70.9%), and with the romantic partner (the word "companion" obtained 23

occurrences in the textual *corpus* and the Companion category was mentioned by 33.5% of the participants). In addition, friendship and friend (words and categories mentioned by participants to characterize aspects of relationship and partner, respectively) are also closely associated with companionship, since stimulating companionship is one of the functions exercised by friendship (Souza et al. 2016a). Other studies have also highlighted the importance of companionship in romantic relationships, whether when choosing partners or in long-term relationships (e.g., Costa and Mosmann 2015; Féres-Carneiro 1997; Gonçalves et al. 2018; Menkin et al. 2015; Silva et al. 2017).

"Caring" was the most often mentioned category by the participants to characterize the positive aspects of the partner. Being a caring person is a characteristic associated to one who is unselfish, empathetic, helpful, attentive, and is closely related to the Agreeableness personality factor (Natividade and Hutz 2015). The tendency to cooperate, help, and care for the other seems to be one of the main criteria for selecting a long-term relationship partner for men and women (Buss and Schmitt 2019; Shackelford and Buss 2000). Several studies, have consistently shown the preference for partners with high levels of agreeableness or who show care for the partner (e.g., Boxer et al. 2015; Huang et al. 2017; Shackelford and Buss 2000; Souza et al. 2016b; for a review, see Nettle and Clegg 2008). People with high levels of agreeableness tend to be true, loyal, and cooperative with their romantic partners, willing to invest in their relationship, and to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Nettle and Clegg 2008). Therefore, caring individuals would be more likely to form a cooperative alliance with their partners and, consequently, this concept is present in the schemas associated with positive valence.

Other concepts that made up the romantic relationship and partner schemas were those related to the partner's emotional investment, such as realizing that the partner is a loving and affectionate person. Emotional investment is an important mechanism for maintaining long-term relationships, helping the individual receiving the investment to feel loved and secure (see Natividade and Hutz 2016). "Affectionate" (to characterize positive aspects of the partner) was one of the words most mentioned in the speech of the participants ($f = 32$). Regarding the positive aspects of the relationship, "Affection" was mentioned by almost a third of the participants. "Intimacy," which can be understood as the process of expressing one's feelings and personal thoughts, and perceiving partner responsiveness (Laurenceau et al. 2004), also characterizes the partner's emotional investment. Floyd et al. (2005) found that being affectionate and receiving affection have positive outcomes for the individual (e.g., negative relation with depression) and for interpersonal relationship (e.g., positive relation with relationship satisfaction). In Brazil, studies also point to the importance of affective exchanges, affectiveness, demonstrations of affection, and loving individuals in romantic relationships (e.g., Costa and Mosmann 2015; Féres-Carneiro 1997; Silva et al. 2017).

Concepts not directly associated with the romantic relationship, which comprised the romantic partner schema, were the following: being hard working, intelligent (categories mentioned by 31.6% and 20.9%, respectively, when asked about the positive aspects of their partners), and being good humored (one of the descriptors most used to characterize the positive aspects of the partner). Literally, characteristics associated with the ability to raise resources and willingness to invest such resources in

the partner and future offspring are considered important in assessing potential partners (Buss and Schmitt 2019). Buss and Schmitt report several studies of different cultures, showing that men and women prefer partners endowed with ambition and operability, even observing sexual differences in relation to these variables. Intelligence would also be a capacity with high predictive power of income and occupational status (Buss 2012). In fact, surveys, with both Brazilian samples and samples from other countries, indicate that men and women consider it very important that their partners are intelligent (e.g., Boxer et al. 2015; Souza et al. 2016b). As with intelligence, humor would be another important variable used to assess the potential partner, both for men and women (e.g., Boxer et al. 2015; also refer to Hone et al. 2015; Medlin et al. 2018). According to Medlin et al., humor would promote social closeness and the strengthening of the bonds between the couple, besides being an indication of the partner's intelligence (Hone et al. 2015).

Characteristics often pointed out as important in the choice of the romantic partner, such as trust, emotional stability, maturity, kindness, understanding, loyalty, and sharing values, personality, behaviors, and beliefs (Buss 2012), also composed the partner and relationship schemas, when associated with positive aspects, for example: Honesty, Loyalty, Respectful, Good Heart, Peaceful, Similarity between Partners (to characterize the positive aspects of partner), Trust, Respect, Affinity, Harmony, Stability, Conflict Resolution, Future Plans (to characterize the positive aspects of the relationship). These characteristics would be related to the willingness to invest resources in the partner and the offspring and, consequently, to increase their survival, to the good parental capacity and to the formation of a cooperative alliance (Buss 2012). Regan et al. (2000) argue that certain personality attributes such as honesty, trustworthiness, and kindness are important to consider potential partners for long-term relationships, as these characteristics would indicate that individuals endowed with these characteristics are able to provide emotional support to their partners and future offspring.

The results of this study also showed that individuals who carry the concepts of companionship, affection, respect, and dialogue in their romantic relationship schemas, and concepts of companion and caring in their romantic partner schemas presented a higher degree of satisfaction with the relationship, compared with those who do not carry such concepts in their schemas. Therefore, those who associated these concepts with their relationship and their partner had a higher level of satisfaction. These results suggest that concepts strongly associated with positive valences serve as the basis for the evaluation of individual satisfaction with the romantic relationship, especially when one considers that satisfaction refers to an attitude and derives from an evaluation judgment about the relationship with the romantic partner. Still, it may be assumed that some concepts are more important than others for the evaluation of relationship satisfaction. Thus, it is possible to assume that people who carry such concepts in their schemas tend to present higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships. Therefore, the perception of companionship, affectivity, respect, and dialogue in their relationships would be predictors of satisfaction. Other studies also found these variables as predictors of satisfaction (e.g., Floyd et al. 2005; Gulledge et al. 2003; Norgren et al. 2004; Shackelford and Buss 2000).

The results of this study also revealed associations between the gender of the participants and the words "companionship," "complicity" (to characterize the positive aspects of the relationship), "affectionate," and "good" and to mention the Caring category (to characterize the positive aspects of partner): being women those who more often mentioned these words and this category. Thus, the women's schemas on relationship and partner present these concepts more often than men's schemas. According to the theory of sexual strategies and the theory of parental investment (refer to Buss and Schmitt 2019), throughout evolution, women would have developed a preference for partners who are capable and willing to care for them and their offspring. Therefore, these characteristics would be good indicators of commitment to the relationship and would be considered positive, desired, and valued by women.

In the other categories/words, no gender differences were observed, although many studies consistently point out differences between men and women in partner preferences (e.g., social status and attractiveness, refer to Buss and Schmitt 2019). Regan et al. (2000) found that, for long-term relationships, both men and women prefer socially attractive partners with a high degree of similarity to them, compared with partner preferences for short-term relationships. Féres-Carneiro (1997) also observed that heterosexual men and women value the same qualities in their potential partners. However, such studies investigate partner preferences. Such preferences may not accurately reflect the characteristics of an actual partner. It is important to emphasize that the sample of this study is composed of married people/people in unmarried unions; and, therefore, the partner has already been chosen. The characteristics pointed out as positive may be different from those preferred in an ideal romantic partner. That is, once the partner is chosen, and assuming that it is unlikely to select a partner with all the desirable characteristics, the person is expected to value and point out as positive those characteristics that, among the desirable ones, the partner possesses, according to post-decision dissonance (see Cooper 2019). However, it is important to note that these results of gender differences should be evaluated with caution, given that the sample size of the male population is small ($n = 24$).

Finally, the interpretations of the results should take into account the limitations of this study. The sample of this study was predominantly female, of medium to high socioeconomic level, and with a high level of education, so it is suggested that future studies include, in their samples, people of the male gender and of different socioeconomic and education levels. In relation to the method used to access the schemas, it is possible that there might have been distortions (caused, for example, by social desirability) or that the relationship and partner schemas might have been only partially accessed. Future research should use different methods to access partner and relationship schemes (e.g., implicit association tests) and also investigate concepts associated with negative valence on partner/relationship schemes. Longitudinal research can be developed to verify whether the association of concepts (or the strength of the association of concepts) predicts the maintenance of the relationship.

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