

# Adult playfulness: An update on an understudied individual differences variable and its role in romantic life

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## Abstract

There is increasing interest in the study of individual differences in playfulness in adults; the way people frame or reframe situations in a way that they are experienced as personally interesting, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or entertaining. In this review, we describe and discuss its role for romantic life. After a brief introduction, we will describe theoretical approaches as to why playfulness is important in romantic life (e.g., the signal theory of playfulness) and give an overview on empirical findings on assortative mating and its role in romantic relationships (e.g., for relationship satisfaction). Finally, we discuss future directions on playfulness in romantic life and singles and open research questions.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Love was such an easy game to play

(Lennon & McCartney, 1965)

Adult playfulness describes individual differences in the way people frame or reframe situations in a way that they are experienced as personally interesting, and/or entertaining, and/or stimulating (Proyer, 2017; see also Barnett, 2007). Playfulness is conceptualized at the trait-level (i.e., relatively stable across time and situations). At the behavioral level, it is expressed through play. Those high in playfulness have been described as having “[...] an

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easy onset and high intensity of playful experiences along with the frequent display of playful activities" (Proyer, 2012, p. 989). While play and playfulness have been studied comparatively well in children, their structure and consequences are understudied in *adults*; especially its role in romantic life. In a 2015 published article in this journal, Van Fleet and Feeney (2015) encouraged more research on play and playfulness in adults. Since then, the field has seen substantial progress. We give a brief overview of the state of the art and focus on why playfulness is of importance in relationships.

Establishing a romantic relationship is among people's most desired life goals and affects one's physical and mental well-being (Weidmann et al., 2016). Adult playfulness supports fostering and maintaining social relationships (e.g., Betcher, 1981, 1988; Lieberman, 1977; Proyer, 2014a, 2014b; Shen et al., 2017). This quality has been observed in animals as well; for example, animals practice skills through different types of play (e.g., rough-and-tumble play) and signal low seriousness through facial expressions (i.e., the so-called *play face*) that also helps social exchange (e.g., Bekoff, 1984; Burghardt, 2005; Sivi, 2016).

## 2 | A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ADULT PLAYFULNESS

There is no agreement yet about a structural model or even a definition of adult playfulness. The majority of structural models suggest the existence of a social component (see Table 1 for an overview). When testing what is shared among different models, Proyer and Jehle (2013) subjected responses to 17 playfulness questionnaires to a joint hierarchical factor analysis. They found the best fit for a five-factor solution, one of which addressed social characteristics that they labelled *Other-directedness* (i.e., "Preferring to work with others than working alone; expressing one's mood and sharing joy and fun; liking to play with children; preferring to laugh with others than laughing at others; being sensitive"; p. 813). While this supports the notion of an association between playfulness and social relationships, concerns remain. Proyer and Jehle also applied a measure for the Big Five personality traits

TABLE 1 Occurrence of social functions of adult playfulness

Author(s)	Year	Name of components
<i>Empirically derived models</i>		
Knox	1996	Curiosity; imagination, creativity; physical activity; joy; <i>social and verbal flexibility</i>
Lieberman	1977	Cognitive spontaneity; physical spontaneity; sense of humor; joy; <i>social spontaneity</i>
Lyons	1987	Effectance; arousal; <i>social interaction</i> ; release
Peterson & Seligman	2004	Playfulness is used synonymously with humor (i.e., liking to laugh and joke; <i>bringing smiles to other people</i> )
Proyer	2017	<i>Other-directed</i> ; lighthearted; intellectual; whimsical
Proyer and Jehle <sup>a</sup>	2013	Humorous; cheerful-uninhibited; expressive; <i>other-directed</i> ; intellectual-creative
Shen, Chick, and Zinn	2014	Fun-seeking motivation; uninhibitedness; spontaneity
Staempfli	2007	Physical animation; <i>social engagement</i> ; mental spontaneity; emotional fluidity; humorous perspective
<i>Functions of playfulness</i>		
Proyer	2014a	Well-being, humor and laughter, mastery orientation, creativity, <i>relationships</i> , coping strategies, coping with situations
Proyer	2012	Cheerful-engaged, whimsical, impulsive, intellectual-charming, imaginative, lighthearted, <i>kind-loving</i>

Note: Social characteristics are highlighted by italicization.

<sup>a</sup>Joint factor analysis of 17 instruments assessing adult playfulness.

and found considerable overlap between some of the facets of playfulness and the Big Five traits (18.5% for Other-directedness).

As Table 1 shows, there is heterogeneity among the models; for example, regarding the dimensionality (unidimensional vs. multidimensional) or type (e.g., state-like, trait-like, or neutral vs. morally positively valued). Some of the current measures and operationalizations also lack distinctiveness by using items such as “I have a good sense of humor” or “creative versus noncreative” for both the assessment of playfulness and (sense of) humor/creativity (for details, see Proyer, 2018; Proyer et al., 2019b). This leads to biases in testing the overlap with external variables and limits understanding the predictive power of playfulness for different outcomes.

Recent models aimed to increase the distinctiveness of playfulness (e.g., not seeing it and humor synonymously; cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and also broaden its meaning (Proyer, 2014a, 2017; Shen et al., 2014). The latter acknowledges that *fun* or *entertainment* are central tenets, but that playfulness also plays a role in, for example, social relationships and intellectual achievements (e.g., Proyer, 2011, 2014a). A recent definition, therefore, suggests:

Playfulness is an individual differences variable that allows people to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or personally interesting. Those on the high end of this dimension seek and establish situations in which they can interact playfully with others (e.g., playful teasing, shared play activities) and they are capable of using their playfulness even under difficult situations to resolve tension (e.g., in social interactions, or in work type settings). Playfulness is also associated with a preference for complexity rather than simplicity and a preference for—and liking of—unusual activities, objects and topics, or individuals.

(Proyer, 2017, p. 114)

This definition is accompanied by the *OLIW*-model (Proyer, 2017), which is an acronym of its components *Other-directed*, *Lighthearted*, *Intellectual*, and *Whimsical*. Table 2 gives an overview of each facet's core characteristics and sample items taken from the questionnaire that assesses the facets with seven items each for adults (Proyer, 2017). Also, a 12-item short measure (three items per facet) is available for applications in intensive panel or dyadic studies (Proyer et al., 2019a).

### 3 | ADULT PLAYFULNESS IN ROMANTIC LIFE: THEORETICAL VIEWS AND INITIAL FINDINGS

There are several pathways for explaining the association between playfulness and positive outcomes in (romantic) relationships. Frequently, it has been argued that to play and being playful elicits positive emotions, which helps people building and strengthening social bonds. Fredrickson (2001) suggested in her *Broaden-and-Build* theory of positive emotions that playfulness contributes to experiencing positive emotions, as “[...] over time and as a product of recurrent play joy can have the incidental effect of building an individual's physical, intellectual, and social skills” (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 305). In turn, the elicitation of positive emotions is beneficial for relationships; for example, by fostering social skills and, thereby, contributing to relationship satisfaction (RS; e.g., Aune & Wong, 2002). Furthermore, there may be behavioral and other characteristics that make those highly playful particularly attractive and visible to others: Chick's (2001) *Signal Theory of Play* proposes that playfulness is of importance in mate choice, as it has an indicator function and communicates underlying qualities. Support comes from studies showing that playfulness is easily perceived in others as data from peers, romantic partners, or even zero-acquaintance studies show (see Proyer, 2017; Proyer & Brauer 2018; Proyer et al., 2019a). Proyer and Brauer (2018) have identified cues in written language that people themselves and others may use for communicating and/or observing playfulness; for example, linguistic analyses of textual self-descriptions have

TABLE 2 Descriptions and definitions of adult playfulness

Trait	Description	Sample items
Global playfulness	Global playfulness is an individual differences variable that allows people to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or personally interesting	"It does not take much for me to change from a serious to a playful frame of mind"
OLIWI model		
Other-directed	The facet of other-directed playfulness is characterized by the use of playful behaviors in social situations. High scorers use playfulness to ease tense situations, and cheer other people up, they enjoy horsing around with friends and engage, generally, in a playful interaction style with other people	"I enjoy re-enacting things with close friends that we have experienced together (e.g., a funny incident that we like to remember)"
Lighthearted	The facet of lighthearted playfulness is characterized by a spontaneous, carefree view of life. High scorers do not think much about possible consequences of their behavior but prefer and enjoy improvising in comparison with elaborate preparation	"Many people take their lives too seriously; when things don't work you just have to improvise"
Intellectual	The facet of intellectual playfulness is characterized by the enjoyment of playing with ideas. High scorers like to puzzle over problems and to come up with new, creative solutions for problems	"I do not like tasks where you have to try a few things out and have to puzzle something out, before arriving at a good solution" (R)
Whimsical	The facet of whimsical playfulness is characterized by a preference for breaking ranks. High scorers are amused by oddities and have a preference for extraordinary things and people. Others often regard them as extravagant	"I like to surround myself with unusual people or objects"

Note: Adapted from "The positive relationships of playfulness with indicators of health, activity, and physical fitness," by Proyer, R.T., Gander, F., Bertenshaw, E., and Brauer, K. (2018c). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. Adapted with permission.

shown that those high in Other-directed systematically refer more to others (e.g., first person plural words). As we will discuss in more detail later, playfulness is a desired quality in potential partners and might carry a signal function for mating.

Another perspective for the importance of playfulness in relationships can be found in biological explanations. Panksepp (1998, 2005) suggested a neuro-evolutionary model of six primary (i.e., innate but yet adaptive) subcortical bio-emotional systems (*brain circuits*) of which one is PLAY (capitalization by original author). The PLAY system modulates the tendency to play and is shared by all mammals with cortical adaptations to play contributing to activate brain circuits that support neuronal growth and emotional homeostasis (for overviews, see e.g., Davis & Montag, 2019; Panksepp, 2005). Based on his studies in animals and humans, Panksepp (1998) concludes that playing “promotes the establishment of social structures and helps ensure the learning of social skills, which can facilitate reproductive success” (pp. 223–224). Overall, this contributes to experiencing emotions such as joy, glee, and happiness. However, further studies on the neuropsychological effects, structures, and processes are needed to understand potential biological mechanisms of playfulness, especially for relationships.

Burghardt (2001, 2005) argues that play facilitates social learning in animals. Similar observations have been made in children, as playing with others during early childhood contributes to learning social skills and bonding; for example, by experiencing and learning social norms, rules, and boundaries during play (e.g., Lieberman, 1977; Youell, 2008). One might argue that inclinations to play affect the development of social and emotional skills of children and adolescents, thus, potentially contributing to how people engage in their relationships in adult life. Taken together, several bio-psycho-social pathways might account for why playfulness is of importance for relationships but further research on the unique and interactive effects of those components is needed.

When Proyer (2014a) examined laypeople's perceived functions and everyday uses of play, their responses could be classified into seven broad categories (Table 1), including “relationships,” which is characterized by statements such as “show affection” and “flirt.” Furthermore, psycho-lexical studies have investigated the usage and occurrence of “playfulness” in natural language: A hierarchical factor analysis of a large written corpus of the German-language revealed seven factors with a *kind-loving* factor that includes concepts such as “romantic,” “loving,” “benevolent,” and “tender” (Proyer, 2012, 2014a). Hence, there seem to be implicit psycho-linguistic theories about a role for playfulness in social interactions. Similar findings have been derived from interview-based studies (e.g., in focus groups; Wheeler, 2020).

As discussed, many structural models of playfulness include facets covering interpersonal characteristics (see Table 1). Taking the OLIW-model into account, the Other-directed facet can be expected to be most important for close relationships, as it conveys ways that contribute to maintain and facilitate relationships (see Table 2); for example, liking to surprise the partner with nicknames or retelling joint experiences. Moreover, Other-directed playfulness is accurately perceived by others, with self-other agreement correlations between 0.33 (zero acquaintance; Proyer & Brauer, 2018) and 0.57 for romantic partners (Proyer et al., 2018b). Hence, Other-directed playfulness is expressed behaviorally and can be well observed by others. Taken together, findings support the existence of an Other-directed component of playfulness in adults.

Scholars of play(fulness) have highlighted its social functions and role for intimate relationships. Berne (1964) suggested that adults' communication and interactions follow certain types of play (*games*) that are frameworks for relationships with different degrees of intimacy. For close relationships, he describes how marital and sexual games allow people to playfully act out and communicate their desires toward their partner. Similarly, Betcher (1981) argued that interacting playfully with others is “[...] spontaneous, creative, flowing out of the self within a dyadic relationship” (p. 14). Studies have tested narrow *behaviors* that one could argue are expressions of a playful attitude toward their partner. For example, Bruess and Pearson (1987) examined the usage of idioms for one's spouse in couples (e.g., calling the partner “sweet pea”), which one might assume to be a prototypical expression of Other-directed playfulness. Their findings showed that greater idiom use was positively associated with RS across couples.

Playfulness also relates to physical intimacy and sexuality. For example, Metz and McCarthy (2007) have argued in their “good-enough sex model” that couple's sexual satisfaction is partially characterized by playfulness. This is

based on findings (e.g., Metz, 1988; Metz & Lutz, 1990) showing that playfulness is a consequence of partners' "trust, mutual acceptance, priority on pleasure, freedom to be oneself, and deep valuing of the relationship" (Metz & McCarthy, 2007, p. 360), that allows them to open up to their partner and to reframe their sex life; for example, by trying new ways to engage in their sexuality (e.g., trying role play). Moreover, Turley et al. (2017; see also Weiss, 2006) conceptualized sexual preferences such as bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM) as a type of intimate adult play that allows experimenting with social roles, conventions, and language. Using a qualitative focus group approach with BDSM practitioners, they conclude that "play permits entry into a world of make believe which is only constrained by the limits of imagination" (p. 329). Overall, the findings support the notion that engaging in play contributes to establish and maintain intimate relationships.

However, individual differences in play and playfulness were sparsely acknowledged in the early literature. Baxter (1992) examined individual differences in playfulness and found that play behaviors (e.g., "We always say "blye" instead of "bye" to each other since the time when one of us was drunk and mispronounced "bye;" p. 353; other examples can be found in the Playful Love Checklist [PLC]; Proyer et al., 2018b) related to relationship length and closeness in opposite-sex friendships and romantic couples. He concluded that playfulness and play (understood as the consequence of being playful) provide means to indicate intimacy and reducing tension in interpersonal conflict by creating meaning systems across partners through forms of pro-social teasing, role-playing, and playful interactions (see also Betcher, 1981, 1988).

Playfulness has been localized in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) VIA-classification of character strengths (i.e., morally positively valued traits). Proyer and Ruch (2011) found positive associations between a global measure of playfulness and the interpersonal strengths of *love* (i.e., valuing close relationships; e.g., making time to spend with close others;  $r = 0.23$ ), *kindness* (i.e., being compassionate and caring about others; e.g., surprising the partner with a dinner;  $r = 0.22$ ), and *social intelligence* (i.e., being aware of others' motives and needs; e.g., attempting to solve conflicts constructively;  $r = 0.15$ ). Pending further verification in experimental and longitudinal settings, one might hypothesize that playfulness goes along with *enacting* ways that support facilitating and maintaining social relationships. Furthermore, Farley et al. (2020) localized playfulness into the well-being dimensions of *Positive Emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments* (PERMA; Seligman, 2011). Using the OLW playfulness questionnaire, they found that Other-directed and Intellectual playfulness were positively associated with the *relationships* component of well-being. They also incorporated a measure of loneliness and reported that greater Other-directed, Lighthearted, and Intellectual playfulness were negatively related to experiencing loneliness (Whimsical playfulness being independent).

Based on the initial findings, we argue that playfulness contributes to forming relationships and that research on playfulness in romantic life should address two major points; namely, (1) *initiation* or whether playfulness is a desired or important trait in the mating process; and (2) *maintenance* or the role of playfulness for indicators of romantic life, most importantly for RS.

## 4 | PLAYFULNESS AS A DESIRED TRAIT IN MATING, ITS SIGNAL FUNCTION, AND PARTNER SIMILARITY

### 4.1 | Signal theory of play

Chick (2001) proposed in his "signal theory of play" that play and playfulness among adult humans could be explained, at least in part, by sexual selection. Specifically, he claimed that males may seek playful females for long-term mates because playfulness signals youth, health, and, therefore, fecundity. For females, however, playfulness in males may signal nonaggressiveness, both toward themselves and their children. Chick et al. (2012) hypothesized, therefore, that being "playful," as well as with presumably related concepts such as having a "good sense of humor" and being "fun loving," would be sought in potential mates. They also hypothesized traits, such as "kind and

understanding" and "easygoing," which suggest nonaggressiveness, would be preferred more by females in males than by males in females while "being healthy," "physically attractive," and having "good heredity," possible indicators of fecundity, would be preferred by males in females more than by females in males. Chick et al. (2012) added "playful," "fun loving," and "good sense of humor" to a 13-item mate preferences survey developed by Buss and Barnes (1986; see ESM). They asked 254 university students to rate the 16 characteristics regarding their desirability. Participants rated "playful" fifth overall but fourth as a trait desired in males by females. Having a "good sense of humor" ranked first overall, second as a trait desired in males by females and first as desired by males in females, while both females and males rated "fun loving" as the third most desirable trait in a partner. These results support Chick's (2001) general hypothesis regarding the importance of playfulness and associated traits. The findings replicated well in German-speaking adults (Proyer & Wagner, 2015), additionally providing initial evidence that people in relationships might be more playful compared to singles ( $d = 0.25$ ).

## 4.2 | Assortative mating and partner similarity

Following the notion that playfulness serves an indicator function, one would expect assortative mating (Luo, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, only Olson et al. 2001 have examined *genetic* assortative mating for playfulness: Analyses of 195 monozygotic ("identical;" sharing the same genotype) and 141 dizygotic ("non-identical") twins showed that monozygotic twins yielded higher similarity coefficients ( $r = 0.29$ ) than "non-identical" twins ( $r = 0.14$ ). This supports the notion that genetic assortative mating exists for playfulness to a certain degree. When testing *epigenetic* similarity in 77 and 211 heterosexual couples, Proyer et al. (2018b) and Proyer et al. (2019a) found the expected similarity when using a global measure of playfulness ( $r_s = 0.22$ ). The findings were differentiated when discriminating across the OLIW-facets: In both studies, Other-directed and Whimsical types of playfulness showed robust partner similarity ( $0.21 \leq r_s \leq 0.47$ ), while similarity in Intellectual playfulness was small ( $r = 0.08$  and  $0.16$ ). For Lighthearted playfulness, there were small effects of complementarity ( $r_s = -0.10$ ). Moreover, the 2019 study also found *profile* similarity across the four OLIW facets ( $r = 0.55$ ;  $r = 0.12$  when controlling for stereotype effects, cf. Furr, 2008). Chick et al. (2020) assessed assortative mating by correlating participants' self-ratings and *ideal*-partner ratings, showing again robust similarity ( $r = 0.32$ ). Taken together, the notion of partner similarity and assortative mating is supported. However, the fine-grained differentiation across the facets showed that this particularly applies to the facets of Other-directed and Whimsical playfulness. One could argue that those are of particular interest in romantic life. Replication and extension of studies are needed to understand assortative mating in different phases of relationships; for example, whether partner similarity changes over the course of the relationship or if people seek similar partners initially. Finally, Proyer and colleagues (2019a) tested whether partner similarity in playfulness is associated with RS. In line with similarity effects of broad personality traits (Weidmann et al., 2016), similarity did not incrementally contribute to RS in couples.

## 5 | PLAYFULNESS AND INDICATORS OF ROMANTIC LIFE

### 5.1 | Relationship satisfaction

Aune and Wong (2002) tested Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) hypothesis that playfulness facilitates the experience of positive emotions and thereby contributes to RS. Path analyses supported this assumption and the bivariate correlation between RS and playfulness was robustly positive ( $r = 0.55$ ). Aune and Wong discussed the role of playfulness as a resource that contributes to solve tension, enhance communication, and strengthen positive experiences within couples. However, their findings must be interpreted as preliminary since the sample size was comparatively small ( $N = 133$ ). Proyer (2014b) replicated their findings in two independent samples ( $N = 161$  and

598). Using a global measure of playfulness assessing the easy onset and frequent display of playful behaviors (*Short Measure of Adult Playfulness* [SMAP]; Proyer, 2012), he also found positive but substantially lower associations ( $r = 0.14$  and  $0.16$ ) than Aune and Wong. The discrepancy in findings is a good example for the importance of considering how playfulness is conceptualized as the choice of assessment instruments contributes to differences in findings across studies. A second caveat is the usage of a global approach to RS, which does not allow to examine narrower aspects such as sexuality, mistrust, or future orientations (Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002).

Few studies have examined playfulness in dyadic designs (i.e., using data of both partners). Betcher (1981) conducted interviews with married couples and discussed the importance of intimate play for “intrapsychic structures and interpersonal processes” (p. 13) by highlighting its functions of facilitating bonding, reducing conflict, and consequentially stabilizing the relationship. To the best of our knowledge, Metz and Lutz (1990) were the first to examine playfulness and RS quantitatively by comparing 77 couples who attended sex and marital therapy with controls. Playfulness was assessed with Betcher's (1977) *Couple Play Questionnaire* (e.g., “I don't like to be surprised by my partner”). As expected, less satisfied couples were also lower in playfulness. However, it must be noted that Metz and Lutz did not test within- and between-partner associations of playfulness and RS.

With the introduction of nuanced methods to analyze dyadic data (Kenny et al., 2006), particularly the *Actor-Partner Interdependence Model* (APIM), a fine-grained analysis of the role of personality traits in couples is possible. The APIM examines the predictor-outcome associations by modeling within-person (*actor effects*) and between-partner (*partner effects*) relationships while also accounting for partner similarity in predictor and outcome variables. To date, only Proyer and colleagues' (2019a) study used the APIM to study playfulness (OLIW) and RS (global and facets) in couples. They found that Other-directed playfulness showed robust positive actor effects for three indicators of global satisfaction, independently from gender. On the facet level, positive effects existed with regard to being fascinated by their partner, showing greater engagement and future expectations for their relationship, physical and psychological affection, and greater satisfaction with sexuality. The analysis of partner effects showed positive associations with physical and psychological affection and global RS for both partners whereas males' sexual satisfaction related positively to their partner's Other-directed playfulness. An overview of the findings is displayed in Table 3. Overall, initial findings support the notion of the positive role of Other-directed playfulness for romantic relationships. Furthermore, Lighthearted playfulness was widely independent from RS except for two effects; namely, an actor effect for being fascinated by the partner and a partner effect for *mistrust* (i.e., greater mistrust toward the partner is reported when their partner is high in Lighthearted playfulness). One might argue that lighthearted types appear less committed to exclusive close relationships, which is associated with lower experiences of trust, but this remains unclear. For Intellectual playfulness, they found positive actor effects for global RS and the facet analysis showed specifically greater fascination toward the partner, engagement for the relationship, and higher sexual satisfaction. However, Intellectual playfulness was independent of the partner's satisfaction. Finally, whimsical playfulness also accompanied greater satisfaction in actors, and the facet-level analysis indicated that whimsical accounts for higher fascination and engagement. Taken together, the OLIW facets related differentially to facets of RS, which allows to understand which types of playfulness relate to satisfaction in couples. However, the findings await replication and extension in samples comprising non-German participants, same-sex couples, and with regard to potential mediator variables (e.g., attachment styles), and methodological extensions (e.g., using longitudinal designs to clarify the direction of associations and momentary assessment approaches).

## 5.2 | Love styles

Lee's (1977) love styles describe individual differences in how people enact and experience “loving.” He distinguishes between six types: *eros* (romantic, passionate love; e.g., feeling strong physical and emotional connection through the relationship), *storge* (familial love; e.g., believing that love develops from friendship and is not seen as goal of life), *agape* (altruistic love; e.g., viewing the partner as blessing and caring about him), *pragma* (pragmatic



**TABLE 3** Findings of playfulness in dyadic studies on relationship satisfaction and love styles differentiated with regard to gender

Study	Outcome	Facet	Women only	Men only	Invariant from gender		
Proyer et al. (2019a)	Relationship Satisfaction	Other-directed	Sexual Satisfaction <sup>P</sup>		Fascination with the partner		
					Engagement		
					Sexual satisfaction		
					Future orientation		
					Physical and emotional satisfaction		
					Happiness		
		Lighthearted			Fascination with the partner		
					Mistrust <sup>P</sup>		
		Intellectual			Fascination		
					Engagement		
					Sexual satisfaction		
		Whimsical			Fascination		
					Engagement		
					Sexual satisfaction <sup>P</sup>		
Proyer et al. (2018b)	Love styles	Global	EROS <sup>P</sup>	EROS	PLC		
			PRAGMA (-) <sup>P</sup>				
			PLC <sup>P</sup>				
			Other-directed			PRAGMA (-) <sup>P</sup>	EROS
			PLC				
Lighthearted	STORGE (-)						
	PRAGMA (-)						
Intellectual	EROS		PLC				
	PRAGMA (-)						
	STORGE(-) <sup>P</sup>						
	PLC <sup>P</sup>						
Whimsical	STORGE (-) <sup>P</sup>		PLC				
	AGAPE (-) <sup>P</sup>						

Note: If not indicated by (-), the effect is positive. P = Partner Effect; that is, greater expressions in playfulness relate to greater expressions in the partner's outcome.

Abbreviation: Playful Love Checklist.

love; e.g., holding clear expectations toward potential partners and being characterized by rational choices than out of passion), *mania* (manic love; e.g., obsessive engagement with the partner), and *ludus* (playful love; e.g., wanting to have fun and uncommitted relationships). Interestingly, the ludic style implies that there is a playful way of loving. Lee describes the ludic lover as

[...]not ready to commit himself ("settle down"). He likes a variety of physical types and can switch easily from one to another. He does not "fall in love" but goes on with life as usual, expecting love relationships to fit into his existing schedule of activities. He carefully avoids future commitment to the relationship (never planning a summer vacation with the partner the previous January!). He avoids seeing too much of the beloved, to prevent over-involvement on either side. Ludus can be played as an open game, with fair warning to the partner, or with deception, leading the partner on (p. 187).

Lee's ludic love style is characterized by a detached attitude, preferring non-monogamous relationships, seeing love and relationships as a type of game, and being willing to manipulate potential partners. Sample items for the assessment of the ludic love style are "It has happened before that I had two love affairs at the same time," "I prefer to keep quiet about infidelities in order not to hurt my partner," and "When my partner isn't there, I like to flirt with others" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Based on findings that such Casanova-like characteristics are detrimental to long-term relationships (e.g., Frey & Hojjat, 1998; Richardson et al., 1988; Vedes et al., 2016), Proyer et al. (2018b) argued that Lee's *ludic* lover shares only minor overlap with playfulness as understood in current conceptualizations and that a playful love style might exist in contrast to the ludic lover. As expected, the correlations between Lee's ludic love style and measures of playfulness (OLIW and SMAP) were small ( $r_s \leq 0.19$ ; Proyer et al., 2018b; see also Woll, 1989). Thus, Lee's concept of a ludic love style is not isomorphic with what might be understood as playfulness or a playful love style. Furthermore, Proyer et al. compiled a tentative list of items that might be more suitable to assess how people might express their love and affection in relationships, the PLC. Example items are "Sharing jokes that only both of us know makes me feel closer to my partner" and "Often, I imitate other persons (e.g., friends, actors) or animals for my partner." The PLC showed good psychometric properties (e.g.,  $\alpha = 0.72$ ; loadings between 0.44 and 0.70) and emerged as distinct factor from Lee's love styles in a joint factor analysis. Contrary to Lee's ludic love style, the PLC correlated with global playfulness ( $r = 0.42$ ) and the OLWI facets ( $0.27 \leq r \leq 0.53$ ; Lighthearted playfulness being the exception,  $r = 0.18/0.10$  in men/women) and was widely unrelated from the ludic love style ( $r = 0.12$ ). Taken together, we argue that there is a jingle fallacy concerning the ludic love style and what is understood as playfulness in general and how it is expressed in relationships. While the findings show that the playful love style can contribute to understand how people express love and shape their romantic relationships, the presented findings are a good example for why it is important to disentangle what is understood as playful and how it is assessed. However, it must be noted that the PLC is only a preliminary list of items that does not comprehensively assess the full repertoire of how people express their playfulness in relationships and toward their partner. Future research could use the PLC to examine the mediating role of playful attitudes on the associations between trait-playfulness, as the disposition that describes the tendency to show playful behaviors, and satisfaction as outcome variable. We expect that the playful disposition predicts playful behaviors and thereby affect relationship indicators.

When testing the association with the remaining love styles, mainly the women's love styles related to playfulness with actor and partner effects, predominantly demonstrating negative associations to pragma and storge (see Table 3).

### 5.3 | Relationship personality

Andresen (2012) proposed the so-called *relationship personality*, a classification of traits that are considered important for romantic life. This classification allows to describe individual differences regarding expectations toward romantic relationships and how people want to engage with their partner and the relationship. Andresen differentiates between *Love* (i.e., understanding and romanticism; need for closeness; being emotionally invested), *Sexuality* (i.e., valuing physical passion and adventure), *Insecurity* (i.e., being anxious in relationships and feeling ambivalent toward close others; being less trusting toward the partner), *Dominance* (i.e., being verbally and physically aggressive; degrading the partner), *Attachment* (i.e., need for closeness; fear of disconnectedness; idealizing the partner), *Seduction* (i.e., being charming and convinced of being able to seduce others), *Faithfulness* (i.e., preferring consistent relationships and routine in those), and *Market Orientation* (i.e., sense of entitlement toward one's [potential] partner; being oriented toward a partner's status and attractiveness). Proyer (2014b) has tested the associations between a global measure of playfulness and the *relationship personality* traits in 558 German-speaking participants. He reported positive associations with seduction ( $r = 0.31$ ) and sexuality ( $r = 0.23$ ), and

inclinations to love ( $r = 0.19$ ) and attachment ( $r = 0.18$ ) while finding independence from the remaining relationship personality traits ( $r_s \leq 0.02$ ). The findings converge with Proyer et al. (2019a) who reported similar patterns concerning greater sexual satisfaction and inclinations to mistrust (cf. Andresen's attachment scale). However, replication and extension toward the OLIW model is desirable to disentangle which types of playfulness relate to the relationship personality traits.

## 6 | OPEN QUESTIONS

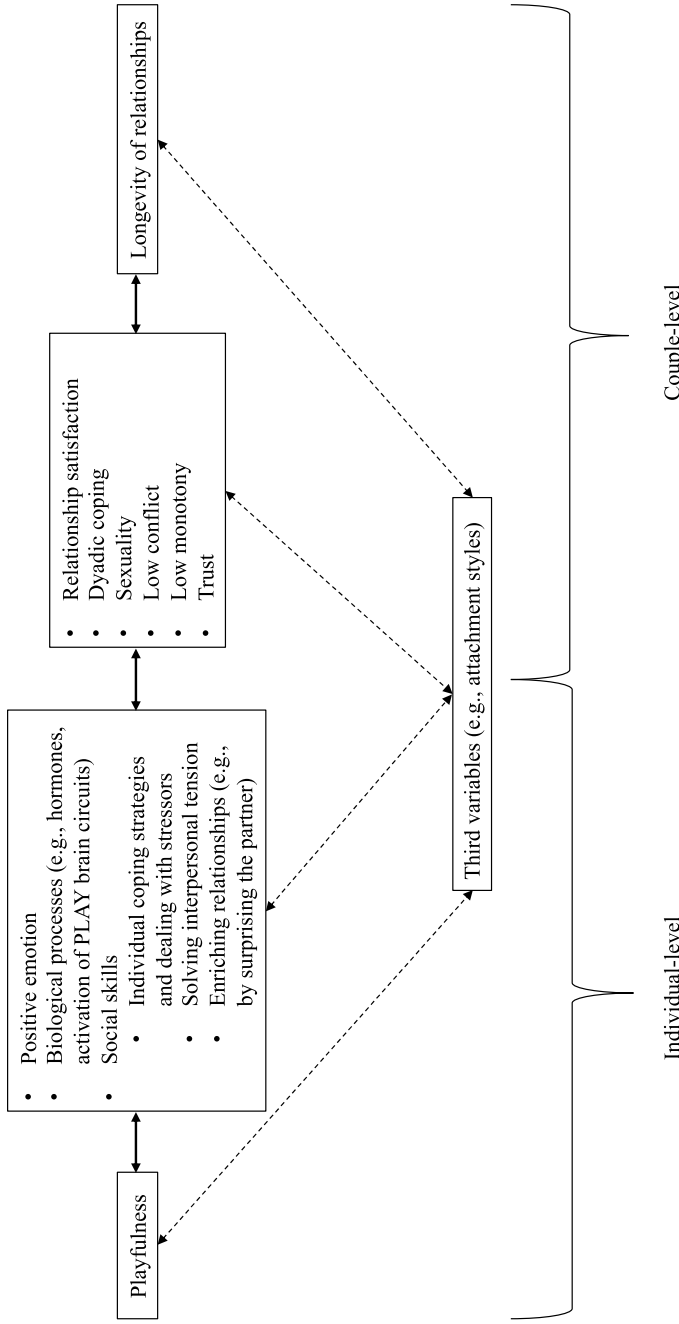
While the majority of findings suggests that playfulness contributes positively to relationships, no study has yet examined *negative* consequences of playfulness in relationships. Drawing on Berger et al.'s (2017) hypothesis that a maladaptive reframing process might contribute to develop psychiatric disorders that are related to cognitive biases (e.g., anxiety disorder); one might expect that some types of playfulness are associated with phenomena such as jealousy, the perceived threat of one's relationship (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Taking the findings on relations with the mistrust facet into account (Proyer et al., 2019a), one might expect that whimsical playfulness accounts for actor effects in jealousy, whereas partners of those high in Lighthearted playfulness might show greater jealousy due to perceptions of lower commitment to the relationship and greater concern of the dissolution of the relationship. Furthermore, attachment styles describe how people approach and deal with close relationships (Fraleigh & Roisman, 2019) based on the two orthogonal dimensional *anxiety* (i.e., worries over close relationships) and *avoidance* (i.e., reducing interdependence by avoiding closeness). It would be desirable to examine potential consequences (e.g., mediator effects) of attachment on the associations between playfulness and relationship outcomes. One might argue that playfulness would go along with secure attachment (i.e., low anxiety and avoidance) as playful people have learned to adopt positive views on their relationships when learning their social skills, boundaries, and needs of others in childhood, as discussed with regard to the literature on children's playfulness (e.g., Burghardt, 2005; Lieberman, 1977; Youell, 2008).

Couple-centered variables have not yet been examined. For example, *dyadic coping* describes how couples deal with stress by examining the interactions and coping strategies of each partner (Bodenmann, 2005). Prior studies have shown that playfulness relates to adaptive coping mechanisms, which permits dealing with stressors and stress positively (Chang et al., 2013; Magnuson & Barnett, 2013; Qian & Yarnal, 2011). Amongst others, those high in playfulness actively seek social support and companionship to reduce stress. However, no study has yet examined how couples deal with stressors from within (e.g., disagreement) and outside the relationship (e.g., child loss). While one might expect that playfulness would contribute to dyadic coping, this needs to be empirically tested since Herzberg (2013) has shown that individual and dyadic coping are not redundant (e.g., dyadic coping being the stronger predictor of RS and mediating the association between individual coping efforts and RS). Thus, it would be desirable to examine whether playfulness relates to dyadic coping similarly to findings from individuals and to study its effects for outcomes such as RS or disagreement.

Longitudinal studies could help clarifying relationships with criteria such as dissolution or having children and also address partners' co-development of playfulness over time. The latter could clarify whether partners might become (1) more similar in their playfulness and (2) whether one's playfulness might spillover to the partner's playfulness. There is evidence that playfulness is malleable through minimal interventions (e.g., raising awareness of how one uses playfulness in everyday life; Proyer et al., 2020; Proyer et al., 2021) and it is feasible that one could be stimulated by their partner to be more playful—or, at least, do more playful things and behave more playful. Moreover, effects of co-development on outcomes such as the quality and quantity of conflicts and RS would be of interest (e.g., Allemand & Martin, 2016).

Prior research has relied mainly on self-reports of playfulness. An extension to partner/peer reports of playfulness and instruments that allow a good description of playful behaviors in couples is desirable. For the latter, the PLC (Proyer et al., 2018b) might be a good starting point, pending revision of the initial list of items. Also,

*Tentative Model of the Potential Consequences of Adult Playfulness for Romantic Relationships (Dotted Lines Indicate Potential Mediator/Moderator Effects)*



**FIGURE 1** Tentative model of the potential consequences of adult playfulness for romantic relationships (dotted lines indicate potential mediator/moderator effects)

observational designs could help to learn more about how playfulness is expressed and used in couples. For example, how partners use their playfulness to solve practical problems and behave in situations that potentially go along with conflict could be examined.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Overall, current research supports the notion that playfulness contributes positively to establishing and maintaining relationships. Taking the findings together, we suggest a working model for potential mechanisms on the individual and dyadic level (see Figure 1). The literature suggests that playfulness facilitates the experience of positive emotions, relates to potential biological processes, and how people communicate and interact with others (i.e., social skills such as dealing with stress by seeking social companionship and surprising others in daily interactions). We assume that individuals' playfulness affects the partner and the couple as an interdependent unit as well; for example, by contributing to RS, reducing conflict (e.g., by solving interpersonal tension) and monotony (e.g., by engaging in an active and fulfilling sexual life), and building trust with the partner. The literature supports the notion that high RS, trust, and low conflict are robust predictors of stable and satisfying relationships (e.g., Weidmann et al., 2016). Hence, we expect that playfulness indirectly contributes to the longevity of relationships (Figure 1). However, it must be noted that several components of this suggested model have not been tested empirically yet; for example, there is no knowledge on playfulness and trust. We suggest interpreting the components of the working model as interactive instead of being serial because (1) no longitudinal data exist to clarify causal relationships and (2) components and partners might relate to each other reciprocally. Taking the interpersonal nature of playfulness into account, it seems feasible that one's playfulness not only affects the partner's playfulness but also how they mutually experience and shape the relationship (e.g., by adapting behaviors to solve conflict in a playful way). Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to clarify developmental aspects; for example, it is of interest how playfulness and its suggested consequences contribute to changes and the stability of prime indicators of close relationships (e.g., trust is built over time). As discussed previously, the knowledge on third variables is sparse. Hence, the study of moderator and mediator variables is a future aim. Again, one could expect bidirectional associations with third variables; for example, attachment styles are malleable (Fraley & Roisman, 2019) and playfulness might contribute to secure attachment on basis of positive relationship experiences during childhood and adolescence, whereas changes from insecure to secure attachment styles in adulthood might contribute to expressing and enacting playfulness with the partner and beyond the relationship.

In conclusion, the study of adult playfulness contributes to the understanding of how people experience, facilitate, and maintain close relationships. However, it is important to clarify how playfulness is understood and assessed to minimize potential confounder effects. While the discussed studies offer initial insights into the role of playfulness in romantic life, it must be noted that ambiguity in the conceptualization and assessment of playfulness make it difficult to generalize the findings across the field (e.g., distinguishing between the *ludic* and *playful* love style). Although only a few published studies exist, we conclude that they account for important domains of romantic life, such as assortative mating, partner similarity, and relationship outcomes.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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