When Is Being Known or Adored by Romantic Partners Most Beneficial? Self-Perceptions, Relationship Length, and Responses to Partner's Verifying and Enhancing Appraisals

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An experiment tested the hypothesis that relationship length moderates preferences for both verifying and enhancing appraisals from romantic partners, particularly for people with negative self-perceptions. One hundred and three romantically involved couples participated in this research. Participants with both negative and positive self-perceptions were randomly assigned to receive either verifying or enhancing feedback ostensibly created through comparison of their self-ratings and their partner's appraisals. The critical test was for those with negative self-ratings who received verifying feedback. For these participants, results revealed that those in longer relationships felt their partners were seeing the best in them more than did those in shorter relationships, whereas the opposite pattern of results was observed for those who were enhanced. Individuals with negative self-ratings who were verified also reported greater feelings of intimacy in the relationship when in long-term relationships. The importance of relationship length in moderating responses to partner's appraisals is discussed.

> All love is sweet,
> Given or returned. Common as light is love,
> And its familiar voice wearies not ever. . . .
> They who inspire it most are fortunate,
> As I am now; but those who feel it most
> Are happier still.
>
> —Percy Bysshe Shelley (1901)

In this scene of Shelley's famous play *Prometheus Unbound*, he speaks of the necessity of love, of feeling content in the knowledge that a romantic partner values you above all others. Although Shelley may have provided a solution for experiencing lifelong happiness (i.e., feeling loved), he did not offer his opinion regarding how people might achieve this lofty goal. That task has fallen primarily on the shoulders of relationship researchers, and the past few decades have witnessed a substantial amount of research attempting to discover the factors related to intimacy and happiness in romantic relationships.

When do people feel happy and intimate with their romantic partners? Research guided from different theoretical perspectives has attempted to answer this question by focusing on how people are appraised by their partners. Adopting a self-enhancement perspective, Murray and colleagues (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b) have demonstrated that people are most satisfied when their partners perceive them more positively than they perceive themselves. Other research guided by a self-verification perspective has shown that

people are sometimes more intimate and committed in their relationships when their partners verify their self-conceptions, or when their partners view them in a fashion consistent with how they view themselves, even when they view themselves negatively (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). One question that naturally follows from this research is when are enhancing appraisals most beneficial in relationships and when are verifying appraisals most helpful? The present research experimentally investigated the notion posited by Swann et al. (1994) that the positive influence of enhancing appraisals is greatest in short- versus long-term relationships, whereas the positive influence of verifying appraisals is greatest in long- versus short-term relationships.

Enhancement and Verification Motives

When two people begin a romantic relationship, they often put the keys to their own happiness in their partners' hands and essentially take a leap of faith. Unfortunately, individuals may not always be involved with partners who mirror their ideals, and Murray (2001) suggests that people reduce uncertainty about relationships and maintain a sense of conviction by perceiving partners in an overly positive light. Such positive illusions presumably quell doubts and fears about committing to less-than-perfect romantic partners. But people also can be less-than-perfect partners, and thus may examine their partner's perceptions of them for evidence of love and acceptance. In fact, Murray et al. (1996a) demonstrated that people were happier when their partners viewed them more positively than they viewed themselves across a number of traits. It is suggested that such idealization and enhancement is beneficial to the relationship because these appraisals represent a form of unconditional positive regard, thus allowing people to feel that their partners see the best in them and thus feel accepted in spite of their faults or imperfections (see also Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Murray, 2001; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Murray et al. (1996a) demonstrated that idealization of the self-concept is related to positive relationship evaluations, and according to Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, and Ellsworth (1998), "this state of felt security or confidence in a partner's continued affections [being enhanced] seems critical for relationship satisfaction and stability" (p. 1459).

According to a self-verification perspective, people maintain satisfaction and intimacy in their relationships by seeking out positive feedback for their positive self-views and negative evaluations for their negative self-views (e.g., Secord & Backman, 1961; Swann, 1983). People in romantic relationships are uniquely positioned to verify each other's self-concepts as they interact in a variety of contexts on a regular basis. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1990) posits that people prefer feedback that is consistent with their self-perceptions because this feedback bolsters their perceptions of prediction and control over their social worlds. Recognizing how others perceive us and being able to respond appropriately is hypothesized to be a key factor in maintaining successful social relations. Verifying feedback is perceived as particularly meaningful because it corroborates self-views, whereas disconfirming feedback is perceived as inaccurate and is therefore judged to provide less meaningful information about the self (Swann & Read, 1981). Disconfirming feedback also may call into question one's self-views and may be a signal that romantic partners harbor false beliefs or expectations. Consistent with this theorizing, Swann et al. (1994) demonstrated that people were more committed to and intimate with partners who verified their positive and negative self-views (see also De La Ronde & Swann, 1998), but this effect emerged primarily with married couples who were more committed and interdependent rather than with couples who had only been dating for a short period of time. According to self-verification research, marital partners are most intimate in their relationships when their self-views are confirmed and become increasingly less intimate the more their self-views are not verified in either a positive (i.e., enhanced) or negative direction (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998).

The Moderating Role of Relationship Length on Responses to Enhancing and Verifying Feedback

The results of Swann et al.'s (1994) research suggested that the shift toward greater interdependence that occurs over time in developing relationships is a potential moderator of the benefits of both enhancing and verifying appraisals in relationships.[1] They posit that at the outset, dating relationships are volatile—each partner tests and judges the other to determine whether the relationship is worth further investment. They likened this process to an extended qualifying exam, where partners present positive credentials to each other, whose veracity is subsequently evaluated by both partners. In this case, enhancing feedback from one's partner may indicate that they are valued and give reassurance that one's partner does not plan on terminating the relationship, making further investment less risky. On the other hand, if people receive verifying feedback on traits for which they possess negative self-perceptions, it may alert individuals that their partners perceive their faults and may pose a threat to the future success of the relationship. Indeed, in their research, Swann and his colleagues (1994; see also Murray et al., 1996a) found that individuals in short-term dating relationships reported greater intimacy in their relationships the more positively they

were perceived by their partners, whereas verifying appraisals were not related to intimacy.

Conversely, as the relationship matures and the relationship's future is no longer a central concern, Swann et al. (1994) argued that the relationship becomes less evaluative and that verifying feedback, particularly of negative self-views, become an asset, not a threat, to the stability of the relationship. For instance, as the level of interdependence increases in the relationship, knowing a partner's strengths and weaknesses becomes a pragmatic concern. In this case, receiving verifying feedback, even if negative, may affirm that their partner truly knows them and that they can depend on their partner for accurate feedback. Consistent with this theorizing, Swann et al. (1994) found that for married individuals, greater intimacy was reported when a high level of congruence between self- and partner appraisals was reported.

Although the benefits of verification were primarily observed in marital relationships in Swann et al.'s (1994) research, other research has demonstrated that individuals in long-term dating relationships also may respond positively to verification of their global self-concept. For instance, Katz, Anderson, and Beach (1997) found that women in long-term dating relationships reported greater satisfaction and intimacy with their partners when there was greater congruence between their reported global self-esteem and perceived partner appraisals. Furthermore, single individuals interested in a serious, long-term dating relationship reported being attracted to potential partners who provided them with self-verifying feedback (Katz & Beach, 2000, Study 2). In addition, recent research by Thomas and Fletcher (2003) focusing on empathic accuracy in dating couples found that for both men and women, mind-reading accuracy during a conflict discussion was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction for those in long-term relationships but negatively for those in shorter relationships.

Taken together, there is some correlational evidence that people in long-term relative to short-term romantic relationships are more intimate with partners that verify their self-views and are more satisfied with partners that more accurately understand what they are thinking and feeling during disagreements. There is also some correlational evidence that people in short-term relative to long-term relationships report greater intimacy when their partners view them more positively than they view themselves (Swann et al., 1994), possibly because in the early stages of romantic relationships, enhancing appraisals may reduce uncertainty about the trajectory of the relationship.

There are a few limitations, though, to the research focusing on when verifying and enhancing appraisals are more strongly linked with relationship evaluations. For instance, this research has primarily used correlational methods (Katz et al., 1997; Murray et al., 1996a; Swann et al., 1994), with one drawback being that cause-and-effect conclusions cannot be inferred. In addition, in this research, it is generally not known if people are aware of their partner's perceptions of them, or rely on these appraisals if they are aware of them, when they subsequently rate the quality of their relationships. In fact, research suggests that people may rely more heavily on how they believe their partners perceive them in the absence of objective feedback from their partners (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Also, the self-perceptions of individuals in these studies are rarely negative, meaning that verifying appraisals are also in many instances positive appraisals. According to verification theory, though, a critical test for demonstrating the benefits of verifying appraisals is to show that people with negative self-perceptions react favorably to feedback that is consistent (i.e., negative) with their self-views.

Overview of the Present Research

To address some of these limitations, the present research was designed to experimentally test hypotheses regarding how individuals, particularly those with negative self-views, in short- and long-term relationships respond to verifying or enhancing feedback from their romantic partners. The present research utilized an experimental manipulation in a laboratory setting to determine the impact of objective feedback, ostensibly derived from partners, on individual's perceptions of their relationship. Participants who had been dating for both short and long periods of time, and who possessed both negative and positive self-perceptions, were randomly assigned to receive either verifying or enhancing appraisals ostensibly derived from comparing their self-ratings with how their partners rated them on a randomly selected trait.

Hypotheses

This research tested two sets of hypotheses. The first set of hypotheses concerns affective and cognitive responses to the feedback. For instance, previous research by Swann, Griffin, Predmore, and Gaines (1987) has demonstrated that, overall, people report greater positive affect after receiving enhancing feedback (an affective response), whereas they are more likely to feel more understood after receiving verifying feedback (a cognitive response). In the present research, it was therefore hypothesized that, overall, people would report feeling more understood by their partners when they are verified by them (Hypothesis 1), but they would report more positive affect after being enhanced (Hypothesis 2). Although possible interactions between

types of feedback with other study variables will be tested, no specific predictions were made. Overall, this pattern of results would replicate past research, but in the domain of romantic relationships, and would suggest that the feedback manipulation had its intended effects.

The second set of hypotheses focus on what people feel the verifying and enhancing feedback means regarding the quality of their relationships. Two types of responses were assessed. First, a few questions assessed the degree to which people felt the feedback meant that their partners were seeing the best in them. Second, a few questions measured how much people felt the feedback meant that they were involved in close and intimate relationships. Given that some previous correlational research suggests that verifying appraisals are most desirable in more long-term, mature relationships, it was hypothesized that people in long-term relative to short-term relationships would feel that their partners were seeing the best in them more (Hypothesis 3) and that their relationships were more close and intimate (Hypothesis 4) after receiving verifying appraisals. Conversely, consistent with some previous correlational research showing that enhancing appraisals are most beneficial in short- versus long-term relationships, it was hypothesized that people in short-term relative to long-term relationships would feel that their partners were seeing the best in them more (Hypothesis 5) and that their relationships were more close and intimate (Hypothesis 6) after receiving enhancing appraisals.[2] However, this pattern of effects should emerge primarily for people that possess negative self-perceptions given that people with positive self-perceptions receive positive feedback when they are both verified or enhanced by their partners.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and three University of Western Ontario students (29 men, 74 women, *M* age = 19.78, *SD* = 4.43) participated with their romantic partners for partial credit toward their introductory psychology course. The partners of the participants were paid $10 for their participation. All participants were involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship for a minimum of 3 months (average length of relationship = 29.69 months, *SD* = 42.35). Ninety-three participants reported dating their partners exclusively, 3 participants reported being engaged, 6 participants reported being married, and only 1 participant indicated dating their current partner and others. Participants were recruited from a mass-testing session that they had completed at the beginning of the school term, also for

course credit. Based on self-ratings obtained in the mass-testing session, participants were assigned to the positive or negative self-rating conditions. Those participants who had rated themselves negatively (i.e., as below average in regard to their peers) on at least one personality trait, which they also deemed important to their self-concept,[3] were in the negative self-rating condition; otherwise, they were in the positive self-rating condition. All participants were randomly assigned to the feedback condition (verification or enhancement).

Procedure

After arriving at the laboratory, couples were informed that the study focused on how they perceived themselves and each other and were then escorted to separate rooms that each contained a networked computer. Having the participant's partner attend, therefore, served to corroborate the cover story that the feedback participants obtained was based on comparing their self-perceptions with their partner's perceptions of them. Both partners were first asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire that asked about their gender, age, relationship status, and the length of their relationship in months. The partners who had not previously attended the mass-testing session were then instructed to answer a number of questionnaires on the computer concerning how they perceived themselves, their partners, and their relationships. After providing these instructions, the researcher said she would be in the room with the other partner (the participant of interest for this research) and asked the person to knock on the door of this other room upon completion of the questionnaires.

After entering the room with the participant who had previously attended the mass testing, the researcher informed the participant that the study involved comparing his or her self-ratings on a number of personality traits attained through the previous mass-testing to the partner's ratings of him or her (which were being obtained at that time). Participants were told that a computer program would generate a psychological assessment that described the results of this comparison for a randomly selected personality trait and that they would receive this assessment shortly. Once partners knocked on the door, the researcher informed participants in the room that their partner had just now finished rating them and proceeded to set up the computer to provide the participant with the aforementioned psychological assessment. The assessment specified the ostensibly randomly selected trait for which to make the comparison, reminded the participants of how they rated themselves on that trait (i.e., either positively or negatively), and provided a description of how well their partner's ratings matched their own (i.e., a verifying or enhancing

appraisal).[4] This procedure was adapted from previous research that implemented a similar approach in the study of attraction to potential partners (Katz & Beach, 2000) and in dyadic research involving married couples (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998). Potential traits presented in the feedback were selected from three scales commonly used to assess individuals' perceptions of themselves and their partners: Murray et al.'s (1996a) Interpersonal Qualities Scale; Pelham and Swann's (1989) Self-Attributes Scale; and Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles's (1999) Ideal Standards Scale. Prior theoretical and empirical work has established that the different traits that comprise each of these three scales are desired in potential mates and that people are more satisfied with romantic partners that posses these traits (e.g., Ellis, Simpson, & Campbell, 2002; Fletcher et al., 1999), suggesting that the qualities represented by these traits are related to the success of the relationship. The items were intellectual ability, extroversion, humor, kindness, social competence, adventurousness, understanding, discipline, success, rationality, goal-oriented, tolerance, and emotional stability.

Half of the couples were randomly assigned to receive a verifying profile, whereas the other half were randomly assigned to receive an enhancing profile. In the verifying feedback condition, self-ratings and ratings from the partner converged:

> This assessment compares your self-ratings with how your partner perceives you on the above personality trait. For the trait the computer randomly selected, your self-ratings, or self-perceptions, and how your partner rates you are *virtually identical*. In fact, your partner perceives you *as you perceive yourself* on this trait.

In the enhancing feedback condition, self-ratings and ratings from the partner diverged, with ratings from the partner being more positive:

> This assessment compares your self-ratings with how your partner perceives you on the above personality trait. For the trait the computer randomly selected, your self-ratings, or self-perceptions, and how your partner rates you are *not identical*. In fact, your partner perceives you *much more positively than you perceive* yourself on this trait.

After reading the assessments, participants were asked to assess the feedback on a number of items, including if they believed their partners were being honest, if they felt that their partners understood them, and their current positive affect. They also were asked questions tapping the degree to which they felt the assessment reflected that their partners perceived the best in them and how the feedback reflected the level of closeness

and intimacy in their relationships. The experimenter then explained the nature of the study to both members of each couple and probed participants for suspicion regarding the feedback. All participants reported that they believed the authenticity of the feedback, and most participants were very eager to read the assessments. Participants then received the promised compensation.

Materials

Partner Honesty Scale. This three-item scale was used as a manipulation check to determine whether participants believed the feedback to be reflective of how their partners actually felt about them and contained the following items: "My partner is not being completely honest," "My partner probably did not take this questionnaire seriously," and "The results of this study do not reflect how my partner truly feels about me." Participants responded on a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). Scores on each item were averaged, with higher scores indicating less agreement with the honesty of the feedback ($\alpha = .57$).

Feeling Understood Scale. This three-item scale (borrowed from Swann et al., 1987) assessed the degree to which people felt their partners understood them: "How accurate do you think your partner's perceptions of you are?" "How much do you agree with your partner's perceptions of you?" and "How sure are you that your partner truly knows who you are?" Responses were made on a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Scores on each item were averaged, with higher scores indicating that people felt more understood by their partners ($\alpha = .77$).

Positive affect. Positive affect after receiving the feedback was assessed by asking participants to rate how they currently felt on seven positive affective traits (happy, passionate, joyful, content, excited, satisfied, and calm) taken from Russell's (1980) circumplex model of affect. Responses were made on a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). Scores on each item were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater positive affect ($\alpha = .86$).

Sees the Best in Me Scale. This four-item scale, adapted from Campbell (2005), was used to determine the extent to which participants felt the assessment reflected that their partners were seeing the best in them and contains the following items: "My partner sees the best in me," "Even when I do wrong my partner views me positively," "My partner ignores my faults and applauds my strengths," and "My partner and I always see the good in each other." Participants responded on a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). Scores on each item were averaged, with higher scores

indicating a greater sense of feeling that the partner sees the best in them (α = .78).

Feeling Close and Intimate Scale. This five-item scale, created for this research, was used to determine what participants felt the assessment signified regarding the level of closeness and intimacy in their relationship and contains the following items: "My partner and I are very close and intimate in our relationship," "My partner knows me better than anyone else," "My partner and I share our thoughts, feelings, and aspirations with one another," "My partner often knows what I am thinking or feeling before I say anything," and "My partner and I can accurately predict each other's behavior in different situations." Participants responded on a 7-point scale (anchored 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). Scores for each item were averaged, with higher scores indicating more positive feelings of closeness and intimacy (α = .81).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

To determine whether participants in the negative self-ratings condition did indeed perceive themselves as below average compared to their peers, and conversely that people in the positive self-rating condition perceived themselves as above average, t tests were performed comparing the mean self-ratings in each condition with the midpoint of the scale (5.5 out of 10). These analyses showed that people in the negative self-ratings condition did perceive themselves on the selected trait as below average (M = 3.39, SD = 1.04), $t(42)$ = –16.24, p < .001, whereas people in the positive self-ratings condition did perceive themselves as above average (M = 8.20, SD = .69), $t(59)$ = 29.66, p < .001.[5]

We next tested whether people in both the negative and positive self-rating conditions considered their selected trait to be important to their self-concept. In the mass-testing session, participants were asked to rate the importance of each trait to their self-concept on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all important to me*, 5 = *moderately important to me*, 9 = *extremely important to me*). In both the negative (M = 6.55, SD = 1.41) and positive (M = 8.10, SD = .87) self-rating conditions, the importance attached to the selected trait was significantly greater than the midpoint of the scale, $t(42)$ = 7.09 and $t(59)$ = 27.46 (both ps < .001 for the negative and positive groups, respectively), indicating that the selected traits were important to the self-concepts of all participants.[6]

Finally, to determine whether participants believed the feedback to be indicative of their partner's appraisals of them, a 2 (self-ratings: above vs. below average) × 2 (feedback: verification vs. enhancement) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the Partner Honesty Scale as the dependent variable. There were no significant differences across conditions for this scale. In fact, the ratings across all conditions were quite low (M = 1.64, SD = .82), indicating that participants believed the feedback ostensibly derived from their partners was real and represented how their partners felt about them at that time.

Responses to Feedback: Feeling Understood and Feeling Good

The design of the following analyses involved a 2 (self-ratings: negative vs. positive) × 2 (length of relationship [LOR]: long vs. short) × 2 (feedback: verification vs. enhancement) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for each of the dependent variables. Participants were divided into the short and long LOR conditions using a median split on the length of relationship variable (Mdn = 20 months).[7] As mentioned previously, participants were divided into the negative and positive self-rating conditions based on their self-ratings on a number of traits assessed during mass-testing. Participants were randomly assigned to the feedback conditions. The age of participants was entered as a covariate because it correlated significantly with the length of individual's relationships (r = .58, p < .01).

Did people feel more understood by their partners when they were verified? Consistent with Hypothesis 1, a main effect of feedback emerged, $F(1, 94)$ = 8.00, p < .01, showing that participants who received verifying feedback (M = 7.47, SD = 1.06) felt more understood by their partners than those who received enhancing feedback (M = 6.92, SD = .99). A main effect of self-ratings also emerged, $F(1, 94)$ = 11.49, p < .001, indicating that participants with negative self-ratings (M = 6.84, SD = 1.09) reported feeling less understood by their partners than people with positive self-ratings (M = 7.47, SD = .96). Last, a main effect for LOR emerged, $F(1, 94)$ = 5.14, p < .05, demonstrating that people involved in shorter relationships (M = 6.99, SD = 1.02) reported feeling less understood than people in longer relationships (M = 7.41, SD = 1.07). No interactions involving any of the study variables emerged.

The next analysis focused on individual's positive affect after receiving the feedback. Overall, a significant main effect of self-ratings emerged, $F(1, 94)$ = 9.32, p < .01, but this effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction of self-ratings and feedback, $F(1, 94)$ = 5.83, p < .05. The pattern of this interaction is displayed in Figure 1. When people possessed positive self-ratings, they reported a high degree of positive affect after receiving both verifying and enhancing feedback from their partners, as indicated by no significant difference
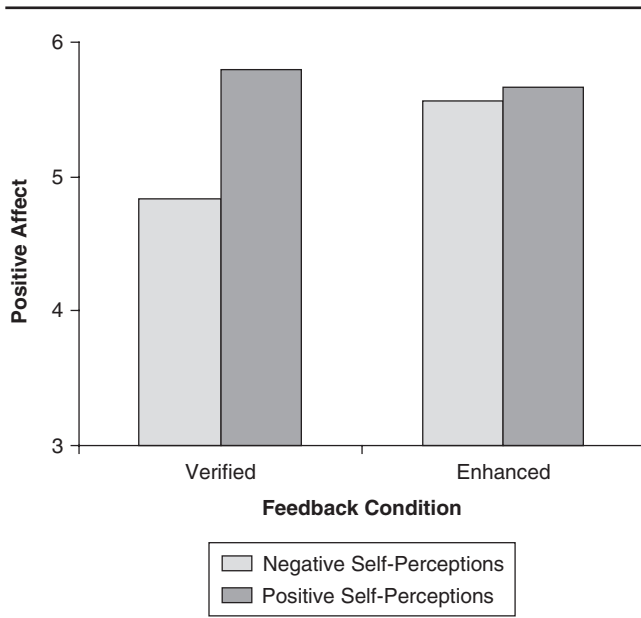
Figure 1   Interaction of feedback and self-rating conditions on reported positive affect.

between the means of each group, $F(1, 94) < 1.0$, ns. When people had negative self-perceptions, though, they reported a greater degree of positive affect after receiving enhancing relative to verifying feedback from their partners, $F(1, 94) = 15.13$, $p < .01$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, enhancing feedback did result in greater positive affect for these individuals.

The results of these analyses are important because they confirm predictions derived from verification and enhancement perspectives regarding how people interpret the meaning of feedback from their romantic partners. When people received verifying feedback, they did in fact report a relatively high level of feeling understood by their partners. On the other hand, people with negative self-perceptions reported a relatively high degree of positive affect after being enhanced. These results serve as a form of manipulation check on the type of feedback that participants were provided and are consistent with the hypothesized meaning that people attach to each type of appraisal from their romantic partners.

Responses to Feedback: Relationship Length and the Meaning of Enhancing and Verifying Feedback

The next analysis focused on the degree to which people felt the feedback from their partners meant that their partners saw the best in them. Overall, the analysis revealed a main effect for self-ratings, $F(1, 94) = 17.51$, $p = .001$, a two-way interaction of self-ratings and feedback, $F(1, 94) = 3.95$, $p < .05$, and a two-way interaction of feedback and LOR, $F(1, 94) = 8.90$, $p < .01$. These

effects were qualified, though, by a significant three-way interaction of self-ratings, feedback, and LOR, $F(1, 94) = 5.89$, $p < .05$. It was predicted that the interaction between feedback and LOR would be most pronounced when people possessed below-average self-ratings; therefore, the three-way interaction was followed up by assessing this two-way interaction at each level of self-ratings using the global error term. As expected, the two-way interaction between feedback condition and LOR was not significant in the positive self-rating condition, $F(1, 94) < 1.0$, ns (see Figure 2a) but was significant in the negative self-rating condition, $F(1, 94) = 10.86$, $p < .01$. As shown in Figure 2b, consistent with Hypothesis 3, being verified by one's partner led participants with negative self-perceptions to feel that their partners were seeing the best in them more when in a longer relationship than when in a shorter relationship, $F(1, 94) = 6.05$, $p < .05$. However, consistent with Hypothesis 4, when people with negative self-perceptions were enhanced, they felt that their partners were seeing the best in them more when in a shorter relationship than when in a longer relationship, $F(1, 94) = 6.40$, $p < .05$.[8,9]

The next analysis focused on what people felt the feedback meant regarding the level of closeness and intimacy in their relationships. Overall, a significant main effect emerged for self-ratings, $F(1, 94) = 5.52$, $p < .05$, and type of feedback, $F(1, 94) = 4.49$, $p < .05$, as well as a two-way interaction between self-ratings and feedback, $F(1, 94) = 12.42$, $p < .01$. Qualifying these effects, though, was a three-way interaction between self-ratings, feedback, and LOR, $F(1, 94) = 3.68$, $p = .058$. As in the previous analysis, we assessed the two-way interaction between LOR and feedback at each level of self-rating using the global error term because it was predicted that the impact of verification should be most pronounced for people with negative self-perceptions. As expected, the two-way interaction between feedback condition and LOR was not significant in the positive self-rating condition, $F(1, 94) < 1.0$, ns (see Figure 3a) but was significant in the negative self-rating condition, $F(1, 94) = 4.71$, $p < .05$. As shown in Figure 3b, consistent with Hypothesis 5, being verified by one's partner produced greater feelings of closeness and intimacy for people when in a longer relationship than when in a shorter relationship, $F(1, 94) = 7.62$, $p < .01$. However, inconsistent with Hypothesis 6, length of relationship was not found to differentially influence these participants' ratings of closeness and intimacy when they were enhanced by their partners, $F(1, 94) < 1.0$, ns.[10]

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first experimental research to test the notion that verifying appraisals
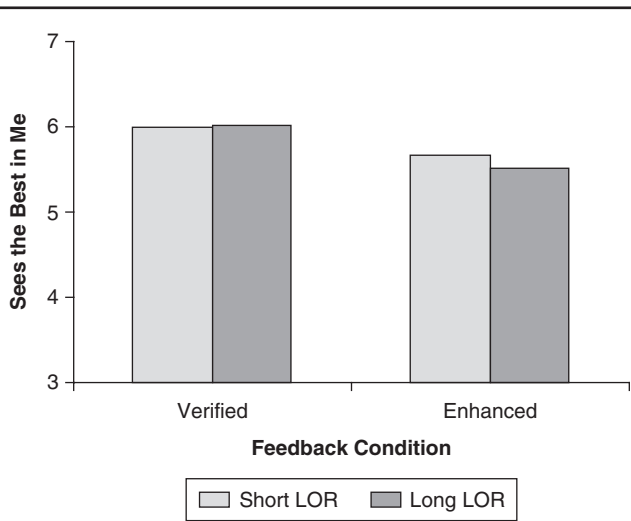
Figure 2a   Interaction of feedback and length of relationship (LOR) on the Partner Sees the Best in Me Scale for participants with positive self-ratings.
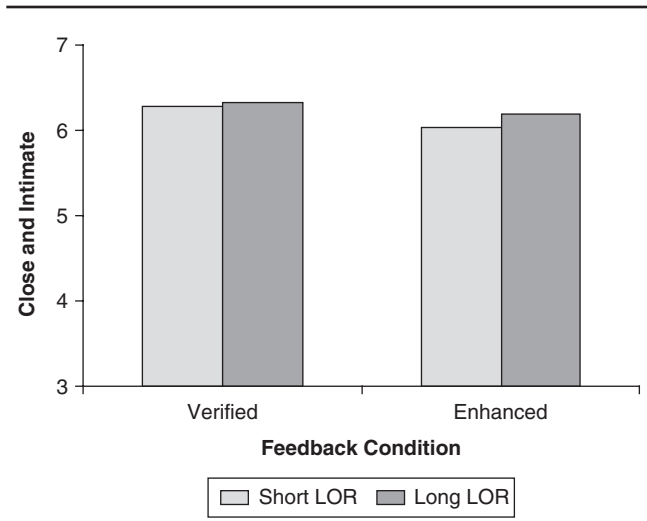

Figure 3a   Interaction of feedback and length of relationship (LOR) on the Close and Intimate Scale for participants with positive self-ratings.
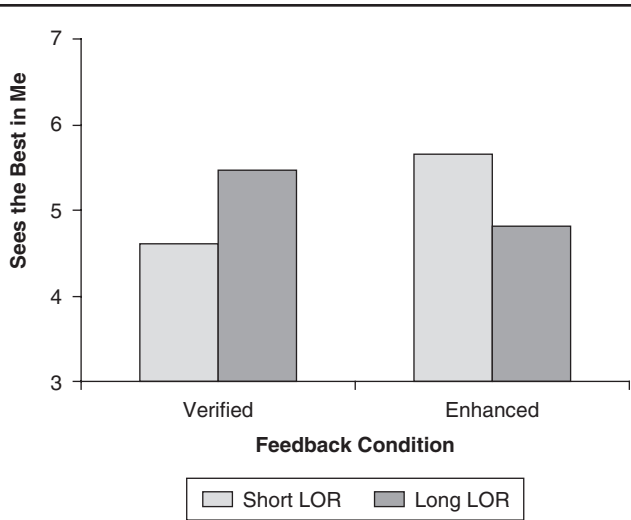

Figure 2b   Interaction of feedback and length of relationship (LOR) on the Partner Sees the Best in Me Scale for participants with negative self-ratings.
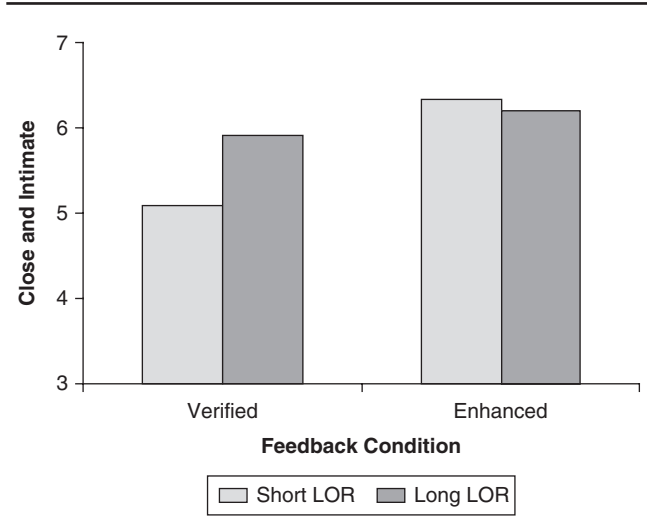

Figure 3b   Interaction of feedback and length of relationship (LOR) on the Close and Intimate Scale for participants with negative self-ratings.

from romantic partners have a greater positive impact in the context of long-term relationships, whereas enhancing appraisals have a greater positive impact in the context of short-term relationships. The results generally supported the hypotheses, but only for individuals who possessed negative self-perceptions on the trait being appraised. This is not surprising, though, given that both verifying and enhancing appraisals of positive self-views are positive in nature. Overall, the

results showed that for people with negative self-perceptions, verifying feedback resulted in more positive evaluations of the partner and relationship for people in long-term versus short-term relationships, but the results were mixed regarding the effects of enhancing feedback. Below, we independently discuss the effects of the verifying and enhancing appraisals on individuals with negative self-perceptions and make some suggestions for future research.

Verification and Relationship Evaluations

Swann et al. (1994) posited that as relationships develop people may possess a strong desire to be appraised in an authentic fashion by romantic partners, even when they perceive themselves less favorably, because their lives become more intertwined and they become more close and interdependent. In the present research, individuals with negative self-perceptions who were involved in long-term relationships indeed responded more positively to verifying feedback compared to people in short-term relationships. They felt that the feedback meant that their partners were seeing the best in them more and that their relationships were more close and intimate than those in short-term relationships. Of interest, although these individuals provided more positive ratings regarding the meaning of the verifying appraisals for their relationships, people with negative self-perceptions reported lower positive affect after being verified than when they were enhanced. Thus, having one's negative self-views authenticated appeared to fuel positive relationship perceptions but not positive affect.

People with negative self-perceptions in long-term relationships who received verification from their partners may have felt more positive about their partners and relationships because this feedback possibly satisfied their need for substantiating their self-views (i.e., maintaining balance and consistency) and for increasing a sense of predictability and control in their relationships (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). These participants also may have felt that their partners truly knew them and that they can rely on their partners for honest and accurate appraisals about their qualities and abilities and that their partners do not possess unrealistic expectations of them. This sense of congruence between self- and partner perceptions appears to provide greater comfort in long-term relationships that are more mature and certain and much less so in younger, emerging relationships. Instead of providing comfort, verification of negative self-views in younger relationships may trigger concern. Knowing that a partner accurately perceives a personal weakness may pose a threat to the future stability of the relationship by engendering doubt regarding the partner's desire to remain in the relationship and thus have a negative impact on perceptions of the quality of the relationship. Although our results are consistent with this theorizing, future research needs to focus more directly on the psychological processes that occur immediately following verifying appraisals to determine, for example, if they cause people in relationships of short duration to feel threatened or people in long relationships to feel comforted.

Enhancement and Relationship Evaluations

When relationships are formed and begin to develop, the desire to be perceived positively and to reduce uncertainty about how partners feel about each other appears to be of paramount importance (Swann et al., 1994). Enhancing appraisals may therefore trigger positive feelings about one's partner and relationship, particularly in the early stages of relationship development. The results from the current study lend mixed support to this hypothesis. For instance, individuals with negative self-perceptions in shorter relationships felt that their partner's enhancing appraisals meant that their partners were seeing the best in them more compared to people in longer relationships. However, enhancing appraisals were related to positive perceptions of closeness and intimacy in the relationship for people in both short- and long-term relationships. In terms of what the feedback meant regarding the current state of the relationship, therefore, enhancing appraisals were equally effective at promoting a positive outlook for people with negative self-views in short- and long-term relationships.

Recent research by Murray et al. (2005) provides one possible explanation for why enhancing appraisals made people with negative self-views feel more close and intimate in their relationships. Murray et al. (2005) found that people with low self-esteem felt more secure in their relationships when their own strengths, or their partner's faults, were made salient and therefore alleviated these individual's feelings of inferiority in their relationships. In the present research, providing unequivocal evidence that their partners perceived them favorably may have temporarily alleviated the feelings of inferiority that participants with negative self-views tend to feel in their relationships, thus making them feel more close and intimate with their partners (in both short- and long-term relationships). In addition, other research has shown that more anxiously attached individuals, who also tend to possess lower self-esteem, felt particularly good about their relationships on days where supportive events occurred in their relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005) and felt more positively about their relationships across the transition to parenthood when they perceived adequate levels of support from their spouses (Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001). Although not anticipating love and acceptance from their partners, these individuals did respond positively when it was offered and recognized.

Therefore, for people with negative self-perceptions, enhancing appraisals may lead to positive perceptions of relationship closeness and intimacy in short- and long-term relationships for different reasons. In short-term relationships, enhancing appraisals may offer hope for the future, as suggested by Swann et al. (1994). In

long-term relationships, though, these appraisals may offer evidence of being loved and accepted, as suggested by Murray et al. (1996a). In both instances, the doubt regarding the quality of the relationship that people with negative self-perceptions tend to possess is temporarily alleviated by the enhancing feedback. It may be, therefore, that whereas verification of negative self-views is most positively received in longer term relationships, enhancing appraisals for people with negative self-views generates positive views of the relationship at all stages of relationship development. The above possibilities are speculative, however, and it may be that other psychological processes are responsible for this pattern of results. For instance, enhancing feedback given to people with negative self-perceptions may have been particularly threatening if people interpreted this feedback as meaning that their partners wanted them to be better than they actually are. If so, individuals may have coped with this threat by defensively idealizing their partner and relationship (e.g., Gagne & Lydon, 2001). Future research will need to more fully investigate the different feelings aroused by enhancing appraisals in relationships at different stages of development.

Caveats

This research has some limitations. For instance, responses to partner's appraisals at one point in time were assessed, and it is difficult to determine how responses to different types of appraisals over time will influence relationship perceptions or stability. Similarly, participants in this research responded to one type of appraisal from their partners (either verifying or enhancing), but it is possible that verifying and enhancing appraisals, when received in tandem, contribute uniquely to perceptions of the relationship. For instance, people might generally respond positively to being verified on specific traits while simultaneously desire to be enhanced on more global, abstract traits (Neff & Karney, 2005). Furthermore, preferences for one type of feedback over another may shift across different contexts. Future research specifically designed to answer these types of questions needs to be conducted to continue to clarify the role of verification and enhancement in relationships.

In addition, this research did not investigate the mechanism or process responsible for the shift from responding positively primarily to enhancing feedback (for short-term couples) to an appreciation for verifying, and sometimes enhancing, feedback (for long-term couples). As Swann et al. (1994) argue, it may be due to increased interdependence and decreased uncertainty about the future as the relationship progresses, which causes partners to appreciate the pragmatic value of accurate feedback from their partners. However, another possible explanation is that as partners become more interdependent and increasingly invested in the relationship, negative feedback may be incongruent with, and threatening to, their positive perceptions of the relationship. In this case, rationalizing the negative feedback as constructive and useful to compensate for this threat may be less harmful and much simpler than changing one's evaluation of the relationship. Research that tracks couples over time, and their preferences for different types of feedback, would be beneficial to expand the results of this research. Last, although the traits used in the present research were taken from three well-known scales that are used in research on interpersonal perceptions and relationship satisfaction, future research should consider potential differences among these and additional traits that may moderate responses to verifying and enhancing feedback from romantic partners (e.g., Campbell, 2005).

Conclusions

Romantic relationships can be an important source of information about the self. Past research has demonstrated that how people are perceived by their romantic partners, in relation to their self-perceptions, is strongly related to how satisfied they are in their relationships (Murray et al., 1996a), how close and intimate they feel in their relationships (Swann et al., 1994), and even how they alter their self-perceptions over time (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Murray et al., 1996b). The bulk of this research, though, has been correlational, with virtually no experimental research assessing the impact of partner appraisals on individual's relationship evaluations. The present research represents an initial attempt to fill this experimental void, and our results provide some initial support for the causal role of verifying and enhancing interpersonal appraisals on relationship perceptions. Therefore, despite the limitations of this research, it represents an important step toward establishing the importance of relationship length as a moderator of positive responses to both verifying and enhancing appraisals in romantic relationships.

NOTES

1. Other potential moderators of verifying and enhancing motives have been suggested. For instance, Sedikides (1993) has suggested a hierarchical organization of these two motives, with the self-enhancing motive being primary relative to the verifying motive. It also has been suggested that people feel better after receiving enhancing feedback but report that verifying feedback more accurately describes them (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). Bosson and Swann (2001) also have suggested that romantic partners want to be verified but they also want to be perceived positively in domains that are relevant for the success of the relationship, even if they possess negative self-evaluations in these domains (see also Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). Thus, according to this research, people should act as sincere chameleons, presenting themselves in a more positive manner in which they perceive themselves in domains relevant for relationship success to receive positive feedback that is accurate with their self-presentations.

2. Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) argued that marriage may be a necessary condition to create this shift in feedback preference. There is reason to believe, though, that the dynamics of relationships change in premarital relationships as the length of the relationship increases. For example, all stage theories of relationship development (e.g., Lewis, 1973; Murstein, 1970, 1987; Scanzoni, 1979) propose that partners become more close and interdependent over time, conditions suggested as most relevant for the desire to be appraised in an authentic fashion by romantic partners. Indeed, people in long-term dating relationships report greater levels of interdependence (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001) and greater participation in more interdependent relationship events (King & Christensen, 1983). In addition, as mentioned in the text, some correlational evidence suggests that dating partners in long-term relationships prefer verification of their global self-concept (Katz, Anderson, & Beach, 1997).

3. Only traits that were important to individual's self-concept were targeted as selection criteria for this research because past theory and research suggests that verifying and enhancing motives should be most activated when people are evaluated on important, versus less important, traits (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Dunning, 1995; Swann, 1987).

4. All of the traits used in this research were fairly evenly represented in each experimental condition.

5. To determine whether those participants who had rated themselves negatively on at least one personality trait actually possessed lower global self-esteem, a subsample of 58 participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. Responses were made on a 9-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of self-esteem. Analysis revealed that participants in our negative self-ratings condition ($M = 6.83$, $SD = 1.24$) reported lower global self-esteem than did those in our positive self-rating condition ($M = 7.51$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(56) = -2.22$, $p = .03$.

6. Although importance ratings in each condition were above the midpoint of the scale, those with positive self-views did rate these self-views as more important than those with negative self-views, $t(101) = 6.85$, $p < .01$. When all of the main analyses presented below were reran, including importance ratings as a continuous variable in the model and with importance ratings interacting with the other study variables, none of the reported results became nonsignificant and no main or interactive effects emerged with the importance ratings.

7. Analyses treating length of relationship (LOR) as a log-transformed continuous variable yielded a virtually identical pattern of results. For clarity of presentation, results involving a dichotomous LOR variable are presented.

8. It should be noted that all of the values presented in Figure 2b are above the midpoint of the scale, meaning participants in each experimental condition felt that their partners were seeing the best in them but in varying degrees that were consistent with hypotheses.

9. Although our hypotheses focused on differences between participants that received one type of feedback in short- or long-term relationships, comparing the means between participants that received verifying or enhancing appraisals at different relationship lengths is also of interest. For instance, participants in long-term relationships felt that their partners were seeing the best in them more when they received verifying compared to enhancing feedback, $F(1, 94) = 8.88$, $p < .01$, whereas participants in short-term relationships felt that their partners were seeing the best in them more when they received enhancing compared to verifying feedback, $F(1, 94) = 3.96$, $p < .05$.

10. As with the previous analysis, comparing the means between participants that received verifying or enhancing appraisals at different relationship lengths is also of interest. For instance, participants in long-term relationships felt that their relationship was more close and intimate when they received verifying compared to enhancing feedback, $F(1, 94) = 16.32$, $p < .001$, but no differences emerged on this variable between the enhancing and verifying conditions for people in short-term relationships, $F(1, 94) = 1.16$, *ns*.

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