



## FlashReport

## The relationship superiority effect is moderated by the relationship context

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has identified the *perceived superiority effect*, defined as the tendency to regard one's own relationship as better than other people's relationships, as a cognitive maintenance mechanism that supports commitment to close relationships. The present research was designed to test the hypothesis that the perceived superiority effect is moderated by the relationship context – that is, to whom one's relationship is being compared. Two different measures based on a spontaneous thought-listing procedure demonstrated that the perceived superiority effect is significantly stronger when comparing one's own relationship to the relationships of people in general than to the relationships of close friends. Correlational analyses suggested that this difference may reflect people's tendency to experience close friends' outcomes as personal outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Research has identified several mechanisms that help people maintain commitment in romantic relationships (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis & Hannon, 2001). Among them is the *perceived superiority effect*, defined as the tendency to regard one's own relationship as better than other people's relationships. In two sets of studies, Rusbult, Van Lange and colleagues have shown that people generally perceive more positive and fewer negative qualities in their own romantic relationships than in the relationships of others (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich & Verette, 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; cf., Frye & Karney, 2002). Furthermore, in these studies, perceived superiority was associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, and persistence. These results have been interpreted as evidence for the functional value of perceived superiority, which fosters adaptive, pro-relationship behavior in much the same way that self-enhancing self-perceptions promote individual well-being and adaptation (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988; Wood, 1989).

Prior studies established the perceived superiority effect by asking partners to compare their relationships to those of “other people,” without specifying whom to consider. The present research hypothesized that the perceived superiority effect is attenuated when the comparison target is a known close friend rather than an unspecified person. This hypothesis had two theoretical bases. First, people are more familiar with friends' close relationships than those of people in general, making it more difficult to reinterpret existing circumstances for motivated purposes. All other things being equal, the more information one has, the weaker the influence of motivated bias (Kruglanski, 1989).

Second, the self may derive less benefit from perceiving one's own relationship as better than a friend's relationship. People tend to “include close others in the self,” meaning that they incorporate close others' outcomes and perspectives with their own (Aron, Mashek & Aron, 2004). With less differentiation between self and close others, relative to unspecified others, evaluations may be correspondingly less likely to privilege the self. This possibility is consistent with the extended self-evaluation maintenance model (Beach & Tesser, 1995), which indicates that the closer and more interdependent two people are, the more their social comparisons reflect assimilation (experiencing the other's circumstances as one's own) rather than contrast (differentiating own and others' circumstances).

Prior research has demonstrated that positive illusions tend to be weaker when the comparison target is a friend rather than others in general. For example, Brown (1986) found smaller self-enhancement biases when comparing the self to friends than to “most other people.” Similarly, Martz et al. (1998) found larger positive illusions about relationship partners' personal attributes (as well as more positive relationship evaluations) when comparing them to others in general than to a friend's partner. Although positive illusions and perceived superiority are both cognitive mechanisms that help maintain relationships over time (Rusbult et al., 2001), there is at least one key difference: Positive illusions are attributions about partners' personal traits, whereas perceived superiority refers to relationship qualities. Under certain circumstances, these may differ – for example, when compatibility is low, when personal and relationship goals conflict, or when partners feel over-benefitted and therefore uncomfortable. More generally, Berscheid and Reis (1998) proposed that judgments about relationships may differ from judgments about partners in hierarchical models of relationship cognition.

Findings from prior research are based on within-person differences (i.e., each participant rated self, friend, and general others), which may have directed participants' attention to the contrast in

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question (e.g., it would seem curmudgeonly to not describe a friend's relationship more favorably than the average person's relationship). The study reported below was between-person, which we believe eliminates the possibility of this and related (e.g., reactivity) methodological artifacts. Prior studies also did not have the advantages of using a thought-listing procedure.

Based on the above reasoning, we hypothesized that perceived superiority would be greater when describing one's own relationship relative to that of others in general than when relative to a close friend's relationship. Thus, the key comparison in our experimental design was the identity of the comparison person: friends or others in general. We also considered two factors that might account for this difference. First, because acquaintance is generally related to the willingness to disclose personal information and emotions (Clark, Fitness & Brissette, 2001), more conversation might imply a weaker perceived superiority effect. Second, to explore the functional significance of perceived superiority, we assessed relationship satisfaction. Perceived superiority should be greater in more satisfying relationships. However, if friends' outcomes are experienced as one's own outcomes, we would expect a smaller correlation in reference to friends than to general others (since there would be no self-esteem gain from derogating a friend's relationship).

We closely followed methods from prior research. Participants completed a thought-listing task during which they described positive and negative qualities of romantic relationships. Thought-listing is advantageous because it accesses spontaneous streams of thought, and may be less influenced than traditional self-reports by lay theories (Cacioppo, Von Hippel & Ernst, 1997). Participants were also assigned to one of two information conditions. Concrete attributes are less amenable to motivated reinterpretation than abstract qualities, so that abstract impressions of a relationship may play a stronger role in relationship maintenance (e.g., Marigold, Holmes & Ross, 2007). In the global (abstract) condition, participants listed positive and negative attributes of relationships. In the specific (concrete) condition, they listed constructive and destructive responses to specific sources of relationship dissatisfaction. Participants rated the desirability (global condition) or constructiveness (specific condition) of each thought. Thus two outcomes were measured: number of positive and negative traits assigned to self versus others, and average desirability or constructiveness of the traits listed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

This study had 383 participants (284 women; 74.2%), averaging 22.3 years old ( $SD = 6.26$ , range 18–57). The sample was 71.8% Caucasian, 12% Asian, 3.4% African-American, 3.4% Latino, 3.7% mixed/other. 218 participants (57%) were recruited from University of Rochester psychology courses for extra credit. The remainder came from Internet listservs and bulletin boards. Participants were offered lottery tickets for three \$50 prizes.

All participants had current romantic relationships of at least 3 months' duration ( $M = 2.53$  years,  $SD = 3.96$ , range 3 months–35 years). Friends' romantic relationships were similar ( $M = 2.43$  years,  $SD = 3.13$ , range 2 months–25 years). This difference was not significant, paired  $t(164) = 0.95$ , *ns*. Friendships ranged from 3 months to 33.42 years ( $M = 6.20$  years,  $SD = 5.76$ ).

### 2.2. Design

We used a 2 (friend vs. general other)  $\times$  2 (level: global vs. specific)  $\times$  2 (target: own relationship vs. other's relationship)  $\times$  2 (item valence: positive vs. negative) factorial design, with repeated measures on the latter two factors. Participants were randomly assigned to one cell of the between-subject conditions. In the friend

condition, participants compared their romantic relationship to that of their closest friend who had a relationship lasting at least 3 months; in the general-other condition, the comparison target was "the relationship of any other couple in the world." In the global condition, participants listed positive and negative attributes of relationships. In the specific condition, participants listed constructive and destructive responses to specific sources of relationship dissatisfaction.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Thought listing task

Participants were given 5 min to provide brief descriptions of up to 15 qualities. They were asked to think of an attribute relevant to relationships. In the friend condition, instructions were:

Please write a behavior in the text box below. If the behavior is more typical of your relationship, begin the sentence with "I" or "We." If the behavior is more typical of your friend's relationship, begin the sentence with "\_\_\_\_", where the blank would be filled by the name of your friend.

In the general-other condition, instructions mentioned people in general, and asked participants to begin with "They" or "Others." After completing their list, participants rated each quality on a 9-point scale, from  $-4$  (extremely destructive/undesirable) to 4 (extremely constructive/desirable). Responses were averaged so that higher scores indicated greater constructiveness/desirability. The number of thoughts listed for own and others' relationships was another dependent measure. Both number and ratings were tallied separately for positive and negative qualities.

#### 2.3.2. Relationship satisfaction

We used a 16-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.83.

#### 2.3.3. Conversational familiarity

Level of disclosure was assessed with two items asking how often participants talked about good and bad aspects of the friend's relationship. In the general-other condition, they answered with regard to people in their university or neighborhood. A 1 ("more than once a day") to 9 ("almost never") scale was used. After reversal, good and bad items were summed so that higher scores indicated higher frequency. These two items were moderately correlated,  $r(367) = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

#### 2.3.4. Friendship length

A single item in the friend condition asked, "How long have you known your friend?".

### 2.4. Procedure

Participants first described how long they had been with their current romantic partner. Participants in the friend condition then named their closest same-sex friend who was in a qualifying romantic relationship and how long the friend had been in that relationship. The thought-listing task followed. Approximately half of the participants described positive attributes or responses first, while the remainder described negative attributes or responses first. All participants then reported their age, sex, ethnicity, familiarity with the other's relationship, and current romantic relationship satisfaction.

## 3. Results

Hypotheses were tested with 2 (friend vs. general other)  $\times$  2 (level: global vs. specific)  $\times$  2 (target: own relationship vs. other's

relationship) ANOVAs, with repeated measures on the last factor. For simplicity, a single score was computed for each dependent variable, by subtracting the number or average of negative traits from the number or average of positive traits. Preliminary tests of order and sex differences, particularly whether either factor moderated key effects, revealed no significant results and were not included in the main analyses. Neither friendship length nor the length of the friend's romantic relationship significantly moderated perceived superiority.

For the number of traits listed, the target main effect was significant,  $F(1379) = 218.49, p < 0.001$ , as was the main effect for level,  $F(1379) = 8.58, p < 0.005$ . More importantly, the hypothesized target  $\times$  friend/general-other interaction was significant,  $F(1379) = 36.72, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.09$ . (This effect was not moderated by level,  $F(1379) < 1, ns$ .) Simple effects tests (Winer, 1962), shown in Fig. 1, indicated that the Target main effect was significant in the friend condition,  $F(1165) = 74.84, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.31$ , and in the general-other condition,  $F(1214) = 174.41, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.45$ . In both conditions, own relationships were rated more positively than others' relationships, but the difference was significantly greater for general others than for friends.

As for attribute ratings, the main effect of target was significant,  $F(1379) = 63.00, p < 0.001$ . The hypothesized target  $\times$  friend/general-other interaction was also significant,  $F(1379) = 10.04, p < 0.002$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ . (This effect was not moderated by level,  $F(1379) < 1, ns$ .) Simple effects tests (displayed in Fig. 2) showed that the Target main effect was significant in the friend condition,  $F(1165) = 10.96, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ , and in the general-other condition,  $F(1214) = 66.47, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.24$ . In both conditions, own relationships were described more positively than others' relationships, but the difference was significantly more pronounced for general others than for friends.

3.1. Controlling for conversational familiarity

We repeated these analyses covarying for reported conversational frequency. Disclosure was significantly related to average ratings,  $F(1362) = 4.82, p < 0.05$ , but not to the number of thoughts,  $F(1362) = 1.81, ns$  more importantly, the key Target  $\times$  friend/general. Other effects were essentially unchanged – for total number of thoughts,  $F(1362) = 38.91, p < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.10$ ; for average ratings,  $F(1362) = 11.48, p < 0.002$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ . Thus, the amount of information does not appear to account for our results.

3.2. Association with relationship satisfaction

Table 1 reports correlations between satisfaction and components of perceived superiority. Although correlations of satisfaction with own relationship ratings are not particularly informative, because satisfaction should be associated with perceiving one's relationship positively, negative associations with ratings of others' relationship

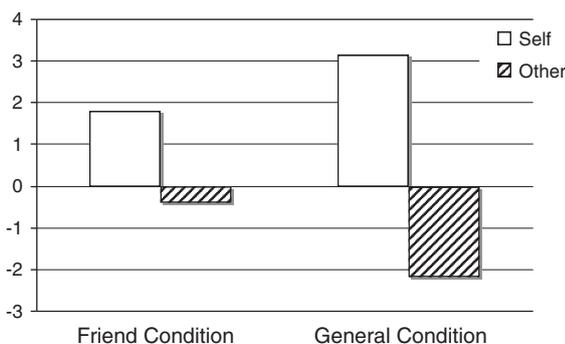


Fig. 1. Number of thoughts listed for self and others. Scores represent the number of positive thoughts minus the number of negative thoughts.

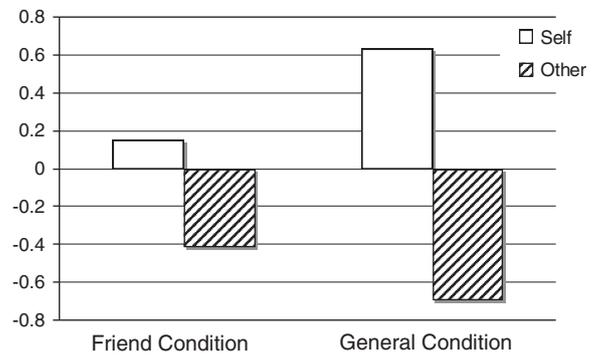


Fig. 2. Average ratings of thoughts listed.

would be evidence of perceived superiority. We predicted that this correlation would be stronger in the general-other than in the friend condition. In the general-other condition, there were significant negative correlations between own relationship satisfaction and positivity of the number of thoughts listed for others,  $r(196) = -0.35, p < 0.01$ , as well as average ratings,  $r(196) = -0.21, p < 0.01$ . In the friend condition, neither correlation was significant,  $r_s(156) = -0.09, ns$ . The difference between correlations was significant for thoughts listed,  $z = 2.64, p < .01$ , but not for average ratings,  $z = 1.18, ns$ .

4. Discussion

This study demonstrated in a between-persons design that the perceived superiority effect depends on the relationship context of comparison – that this effect is weaker when comparing one's relationship to a close friend than to people in general. Results supported this hypothesis for both the number and positivity of thoughts listed.

The social-psychological literature includes many processes showing that coping activities are facilitated by optimistic, self-enhancing perceptions (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Because the contrasting category is often non-specific – e.g., indeterminate others, people in general – participants may have little personal familiarity or feelings of connection with the comparison target and little personal investment in their outcomes. Although such comparisons are probably common, people also compare themselves to familiar others with whom they feel a sense of connection and concern. In this circumstance, self-enhancement may imply relatively negative perceptions of the other. To the extent that these others are “included in the self” (Aron et al., 2004), detrimental views of them would entail personal costs. Thus, the present results are consistent with the extended self-evaluation maintenance model (Beach & Tesser, 1995), which proposes that close others' fortunes be to some extent experienced as one's own.

This research also considered informational and motivational explanations. The informational explanation, that the effect reflects conversations about the other's relationship (familiarity), was not supported. As for the motivational explanation (inclusion), own satisfaction was correlated with ratings of “people-in-general's” relationships but not of friend's relationships, suggesting that viewing

Table 1  
Correlations between relationship satisfaction and components of perceived superiority.

	Friend		General other	
	Self	Other	Self	Other
Number of thoughts listed	0.32**	-0.09	0.27**	-0.35**
Average ratings	0.25**	-0.09	0.35**	-0.21**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

others' relationships less favorably provides lesser motivational benefit when the other is meaningfully connected to oneself. Of course, these conclusions are at best tentative. Neither is based on direct manipulation, and alternative interpretations are possible. Future research is needed to determine whether familiarity or feelings of connection are responsible for perceived superiority and conceptually similar effects. An additional factor that was manipulated, level of construal, which has both informational and motivational elements, did not alter our results.

This research had several limitations. First, we relied on self-descriptions. It would be desirable to compare these accounts to friends' reports, and to descriptions by third parties and independent observers. It would also be useful to examine whether perceived superiority, a cognitive maintenance mechanism, is reflected in behavior (which presumably has more proximal impact on partners). Second, does perceived superiority influence long-term marriages and non-romantic relationships (e.g., among siblings)? Third, this research was cross-sectional. *Rusbult et al. (2000)* showed that perceived superiority relative to general others facilitated relationship maintenance over time. It remains to be shown whether the smaller perceived superiority effects we observed in comparison to friends also predict relationship longevity.

In conclusion, perceived relationship superiority is another example of a social-psychological process influenced by relationship context. Understanding basic social-psychological processes will benefit from considering how relationship contexts moderate social cognition and behavior.

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