Feeling Better About Doing Worse: Social Comparisons Within Romantic Relationships

Penelope Lockwood and Dan Dolderman
University of Toronto

Pamela Sadler
Wilfrid Laurier University

Elinora Gerchak
University of Toronto

The authors examined the role of closeness between self and partner in determining the impact of social comparisons within intimate relationships. To the extent that one’s partner is a central aspect of one’s identity, one may be able to restore one’s positive self-regard following an upward comparison with the partner by turning to the relationship as a self-affirmational resource. Studies 1 and 2 examined reactions to imagined comparisons; Studies 3 and 4 examined reactions to actual comparison feedback. Across studies, closeness moderated the impact of upward comparisons with the partner; that is, higher closeness participants responded to a more successful partner by focusing on their relationship-related strengths. However, closeness did not moderate the impact of downward comparisons with the partner.

In recent decades, the career options for women and men have become increasingly open; it is common for both partners in a marriage to work outside the home, and it is not unusual for relationship partners to work in highly similar occupations. As career similarity increases, individuals can make more direct comparisons between their own successes or shortcomings and those of their partner. When a lawyer wins an award for outstanding performance on a test gave less helpful clues to a friend than to a stranger who had to perform the same task (Tesser & Smith, 1980). Participants who had received negative feedback about their own performance on a task may even attempt to undermine the success of a close other by sabotaging the other’s performance; in one study, for example, participants who had received negative feedback about their own performance on a test gave less helpful clues to a friend than to a stranger who had to perform the same task (Tesser & Smith, 1980).

Relationship partners typically interact on a daily basis and have privileged knowledge of each other’s successes and failures; consequently, the potential for social comparisons between partners is high. Moreover, given that individuals are typically highly close to their romantic partners, these comparisons may be particularly threatening. However, although one might expect comparisons within romantic relationships to pose serious problems, recent research suggests that this may not be the case. In their extended self-evaluation maintenance model, Beach and Tesser (1995) posit that the negative impact of upward comparisons to a relationship partner is mitigated because a person responds sympathetically to

Penelope Lockwood, Dan Dolderman, and Elinora Gerchak, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Pamela Sadler, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Penelope Lockwood, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G3, Canada. E-mail: lockwood@psych.utoronto.ca

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his or her partner. When the partner outperforms the self in a domain relevant to the partner, one is happy for the partner, and one’s own negative response is therefore attenuated; conversely, when one outperforms the partner, one feels concern for the partner, and one’s own positive response is therefore diminished. Consistent with their model, these researchers found that married individuals reported feeling better about being outperformed by, rather than outperforming, their partner when they recalled comparisons in domains that were highly relevant to their partner (Beach et al., 1998). This empathic effect was strongest when the domain was also low in self-relevance. On dimensions high in self-relevance, participants generally reported more negative affect when they were outperformed by than when they outperformed the partner (Beach et al., 1998). This suggests that in self-relevant domains, the threat of an upward comparison may be diminished, but not eradicated, by individuals’ empathy for their partner.

It is also possible, however, that when relationships are especially close, the comparison threat is eliminated altogether. To the extent that one is highly close to one’s partner, one may be able to experience the partner’s successes as one’s own. Closeness can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, including breadth and depth of influence (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), commitment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), and cognitive overlap between self and partner (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron & Fraley, 1999). In the present research, we use the term closeness to refer to the latter, the degree to which one has incorporated one’s partner into one’s own sense of self. According to Aron and Aron’s (1986) self-expansion model, when one becomes involved in a romantic relationship, one’s self-concept expands to include the resources, perspectives, and characteristics of one’s partner (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). When one’s partner’s identity overlaps with one’s own, the partner’s accomplishments may have a positive impact on the self. Nevertheless, although individuals might at times experience their partners’ successes as their own, it seems unlikely that individuals are able to do so when their own achievements are unequivocally inferior (McFarland, Buehler, & Mackay, 2001). When one receives clear feedback about both one’s own inferior performance and the superior performance of one’s partner, the negative implications for the self may outweigh one’s pride in the partner’s achievements, despite one’s close connection with the partner (cf. Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Schmitt, Silvia, & Branscombe, 2000).

Two sets of studies have examined how the expanded self-influences responses to comparisons with a close other. In one study, participants who rated their identity as overlapping with that of a close other experienced more positive affect when they learned that the other had performed well than when the other had performed poorly on a test of social perceptiveness. However, when participants received explicit feedback about both their own and a close other’s performance, they were no longer boosted by the partner’s success (McFarland et al., 2001). Another study found that, when participants were primed with interdependence, making salient their interconnectedness with a friend, they predicted that the friend would receive a higher score on a self-relevant Graduate Record Examination-type test than would a stranger; in contrast, participants not primed with interdependence predicted higher scores for strangers than friends (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002; Study 1). This suggests that although individuals may typically be more uncomfortable when outperformed by a friend than a stranger, they may be less resistant to the idea that they have been outperformed by a friend when they view the friend as part of their identity. However, although participants in this study were aware of their own scores, the comparison was not explicit: They did not receive direct feedback about the friend’s performance. It may be easier to entertain the possibility of a highly successful friend before the actual difference in performance levels is known. In the present studies, we focused on the impact of comparisons in which the self’s performance was clearly inferior in a highly self-relevant domain and, therefore, most likely to be self-threatening.

In sum, despite empathy for or identification with the partner, individuals may find explicit comparisons to a more successful relationship partner to be painful. Given the potential costs of such comparison-related threats both to the self and to the relationship, individuals are likely to seek alternative ways of defusing this threat. One readily available response may involve using the relationship itself as a resource; by affirming one’s relationship strengths, one can ease the pain of the comparison, eliminating the need to derogate or distance oneself from the partner. Consistent with this possibility, research suggests that individuals can reduce threats to their self-esteem by focusing on a valued aspect of their self-identity (Steele, 1988). In one study, for example, participants were able to restore their self-esteem following an upward comparison by reflecting on a treasured personal value; this self-affirmation exercise eliminated participants’ need to engage in such strategies as reducing their closeness to the comparison other or minimizing the relevance of the comparison dimension (Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000).

Within relationships, self-affirmation offers the means of resolving an uncomfortable comparison with one’s partner without actually harming perceptions of the partner or damaging the relationship. Indeed, when individuals’ self-concepts are threatened by negative performance feedback, they can alleviate this threat by exaggerating the extent to which they are valued as relationship partners (Murray, Bellavia, Feeney, Holmes, & Rose, 2001; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998); the relationship serves as a buffer, protecting individuals from potentially damaging feedback about their abilities. In the context of an intrarelationship comparison, moreover, one’s relationship-relevant values may be especially salient, making the relationship especially accessible as a self-affirmational resource.

We propose that relationship closeness, the extent to which one has incorporated the partner into one’s own sense of self, determines the degree to which individuals affirm their relationship following a threatening upward comparison. For highly close individuals, the partner is a central part of their identity; these individuals may be able to escape from the negative impact of an upward comparison to the partner by focusing on their own relationship-related strengths. By affirming one’s attributes as a warm, caring, and affectionate partner, one can restore one’s positive self-views without withdrawing from the partner or sabotaging the partner’s achievements. Instead of damaging the relationship, moreover, this process may actually serve to strengthen the bond between partners: To the extent that one’s relationship-relevant self-perceptions are enhanced, one may value one’s partner and one’s relationship to an even higher degree. Among individuals low in closeness, the relationship is a less central part
of their identity, and it therefore cannot serve as a self-affirming value. Instead of turning to the relationship as a resource for coping with the comparison threat, low-closeness individuals may instead attempt to distance themselves from the relationship that is the source of their comparison distress.

Up to this point, we have focused on individuals’ reactions to upward comparisons within the relationship. It is also possible that individuals might find downward intrarelationship comparisons to be distressing. Typically, individuals find comparisons to worse-off others to be enhancing, reminding them of their own superiority (e.g., Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981); when one’s own identity is closely connected to that of the other, however, the comparison may become threatening (Lockwood, 2002). For example, when individuals believe that an in-group member’s failure reflects negatively on their own abilities, their self-views may be deflated by the other’s poor performance (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). In addition, to the extent that one empathizes with the partner’s concerns, one may experience guilt following the downward comparison (Beach et al., 1998) and seek ways to compensate for the comparison’s negative impact on the partner. Given that concern for one’s individual, independent self tends to take precedence over concern for one’s collective, interpersonal self (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1999), however, we did not expect a strong, negative reaction to downward comparisons. Individuals may be unable to take pleasure in the partner’s poor performance and may experience some degree of guilt; however, they likely do not feel as strong a need to compensate for the partner’s failure as they feel for their own failure. In any case, it is unclear that self-affirmation serves to reduce an indirect threat, a threat to one’s partner, in the same way that it alleviates a direct threat to the self. Thus, we hypothesized that a superior partner is more likely to elicit a relationship-affirming reaction than is an inferior partner.

In four studies, we examined the role of closeness between self and partner in determining individuals’ responses to intrarelationship comparisons. In Study 1, we measured participants’ perceived closeness to their partners and examined their beliefs about how they would respond to an imagined comparison scenario. In Study 2, we attempted to replicate the results of Study 1, after temporarily inducing feelings of high or low closeness through a priming manipulation. In Studies 3 and 4, we examined the effects of actual rather than imagined intrarelationship comparisons on both competence-based and relationship-related self-appraisals. We expected to find evidence of self-affirmation following an upward comparison only on the relationship-relevant appraisals. Participants’ ability to affirm on competence-based dimensions would be constrained by the explicit feedback they had received regarding their abilities on the comparison dimension; self-affirmation typically occurs in a domain that is unrelated to the threat (Steele, 1988). Moreover, because the comparison occurred in the context of the relationship, we expected that the relationship would be especially salient as a central value for self-affirmation. Thus, high-closeness participants would be most likely to engage in self-affirmation by focusing on their relationship strengths. In contrast, we expected that low-closeness participants, for whom this self-affirmation route would not be available, would reduce the threat of the upward comparison by minimizing the importance of their relationship attributes; instead of pulling closer to their relationship, they would seek to eliminate comparison discomfort by pulling away from the relationship. Finally, we expected these effects following upward but not downward comparisons. Because downward comparisons are less likely to pose a direct threat to the self, participants would be less strongly motivated to engage in either self-affirmation or distancing strategies.

Study 1: Closeness Determines the Predicted Impact of Imagined Comparisons

Study 1 examined individuals’ reactions to imagined upward and downward comparisons. Participants first rated their closeness to their partner. They then indicated how their competence-based self-perceptions and their overall self-esteem would be affected if they outperformed or were outperformed by their partner in a highly self-relevant domain. We expected that participants would predict that upward comparisons would have a more negative impact on their competence-based self-perceptions than would downward comparisons. However, for high-closeness participants, we predicted that this negative impact would not generalize to their overall, more global self-esteem; because they would be able to draw on their relationship as a self-affirming value, their overall self-regard would be protected from the threat of the upward comparison. In contrast, among low-closeness participants, for whom the relationship would not serve as a self-affirming value, the upward comparison would have a negative impact on their overall self-esteem.

Method

Participants. Participants were 14 male and 23 female Introductory Psychology students at the University of Toronto who participated for course credit. Participants were selected for the study if they indicated on a prescreening questionnaire that they were in a relationship with another student. There were no gender effects on any of the variables, therefore gender is not discussed further.

Procedure. Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on relationships. They first rated themselves on four items designed to tap into relationship closeness, the degree to which they viewed their partner as a central aspect of their own identity (“I feel very interconnected with my partner,” “My partner is a major part of who I am,” “I tend to think of my partner and me as a unit, not as two separate individuals,” and “My identity and my partner’s identity overlap a great deal”). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale with endpoints labeled 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

Next, participants were asked to imagine either an upward or downward comparison. In the upward comparison condition, participants were instructed to “imagine that you and your partner are taking the same course at school. You have both been studying hard for the final exam in that course. When you get your results, it turns out that you have received a final grade of 75% in the course whereas your partner’s final grade is 90%.” In the downward comparison condition, participants were given the same instructions but asked to imagine a scenario in which their own final grade was 75% and their partner’s final grade was 60%.

We wished to avoid providing participants with clear success or failure feedback independent of the partner feedback; that is, we sought to examine the impact of the partner’s relatively more or less successful score rather than the impact of participants’ own absolute score. Accordingly, for both the upward and downward scenarios, we used a self-score of 75; this score (a B letter grade) is somewhat above the average for most courses at the University of Toronto but is not spectacularly successful. We surmised that, because individuals typically expect to be somewhat better than average (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988), most participants would perceive this score to be relatively neutral (cf. McFarland et al., 2001). Thus, we
would be able to focus on the impact of the partner’s relatively higher or lower score on participants’ self-views.

After imagining the scenario, participants rated how the comparison would make them feel on three ability-related traits: academically competent, accomplished, and capable. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (less than usual) to 5 (more than usual).

Finally, participants were asked to indicate how the comparison would affect their overall self-esteem on a 5-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (I would feel worse about myself than usual) to 5 (I would feel better about myself than usual).

**Results**

**Closeness.** Closeness items were averaged to form a single index of closeness (Cronbach’s α = .80; M = 3.15).

Participants’ predictions regarding the impact of comparisons on competence-based self-perceptions. Competence ratings were averaged into a single index (Cronbach’s α = .83), which was then regressed on closeness and comparison type. The main effect of comparison type was significant, F(1, 33) = 24.15, p < .001; participants believed they would feel more competent after a downward (M = 3.33) than upward (M = 2.41) comparison. The main effect of closeness was also significant, F(1, 33) = 5.26, p = .03. Higher closeness participants believed they would feel more competent than did lower closeness participants, regardless of the comparison type. The Closeness x Comparison Type interaction was not significant, F<1. Thus, as expected, we found no evidence of self-affirmation on competence-based self-ratings. Presumably, because participants made the comparison in a competence-related domain, they were unable to use this domain to restore their self-worth.

Participants’ predictions regarding the impact of comparisons on overall self-esteem. Overall self-esteem was regressed on closeness and comparison type. The main effect of comparison type was significant; participants reported that they would feel better about themselves after a downward comparison than an upward comparison, F(1, 33) = 8.56, p = .006. This main effect was qualified by a significant Closeness x Comparison Type interaction, F(1, 33) = 4.54, p = .04 (see Figure 1). The main effect of closeness was not significant, F<1.

As predicted, participants’ global self-regard in response to an imagined downward comparison did not differ across levels of closeness; closeness and global self-perceptions were not significantly correlated (r = .25, p = .30). When participants imagined an upward comparison, however, closeness was positively correlated with global self-perceptions, r = .46, p = .06; higher closeness participants predicted that they would feel better than did lower closeness participants. We then tested the impact of the comparison at different levels of closeness (West, Aiken, & Krull, 1996). At low levels of closeness (−1 SD), participants believed they would feel significantly worse about themselves after an upward than a downward comparison, F(1, 33) = 13.50, p = .0008. At high levels of closeness (+1 SD), participants’ imagined reactions to upward and downward comparisons did not differ (F<1).

In sum, participants who imagined downward comparisons reported feeling more competent than did those who imagined upward comparisons. However, for the measure of overall self-esteem, this effect was moderated by closeness: Among participants high in closeness, the threatening impact of the imagined upward comparison was eliminated. This is consistent with the notion that high-closeness individuals compensate for the threat of the upward comparison by affirming their value for their relationship. Nevertheless, this study provides no direct evidence that such an affirmation process is taking place. Indeed, it may simply be the case that high-closeness individuals find a superior partner to be less threatening; they may empathize with the partner to a sufficient degree that their own less stellar performance seems inconsequential. Accordingly, in a second study, we included a more direct measure of relationship affirmation, specifically examining whether participants’ perceptions of their relationship-related qualities would be boosted following an upward comparison.

**Study 2: Primed Closeness Determines the Impact of Imagined Comparisons**

In Study 2, participants imagined a comparison, and then, as in Study 1, they indicated their beliefs about how the comparison would affect both their competence-based self-appraisals and their more global self-esteem. Next, they rated their competence-relevant and relationship-relevant self-appraisals without specific reference to the imagined comparison. This enabled us to test our hypotheses regarding self-affirmation on relationship-relevant views more directly.

We also sought additional evidence to support our hypotheses regarding closeness. Although identity overlap has typically been conceptualized as a chronic individual difference (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), we reasoned that individuals’ closeness to their partners might be subject to temporary fluctuations as a result of cues in the environment. Consistent with this possibility, evidence suggests that the extent to which one views one’s identity in independent or interpersonal terms may be primed (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). We considered the possibility that relationship identity overlap could also be primed, by activating either feelings of being connected to or feelings of being separate from the partner. Previous research suggests that concepts may be primed through exposure to words related to those concepts (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Srull & Wyer, 1979); for example, priming words associated with politeness or rudeness influenced participants’ subsequent behavioral
Closeness was primed through a sentence unscrambling task (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Srull & Wyer, 1979) that included words related either to separateness (low closeness) or to connectedness (high closeness). Participants then imagined either an upward or downward comparison to their partner and predicted how the comparison they had imagined would affect them. Finally, they rated themselves on items tapping competence-relevant and relationship-relevant self-appraisals.

We expected that participants’ predictions regarding the impact of the comparison would replicate those of Study 1. That is, participants would predict that an upward comparison would have a negative impact, relative to a downward comparison, on their competence-based self-appraisals. High-closeness participants, however, who would have the greatest relationship resources available to compensate for this threat, would focus on their relationship strengths and, consequently, would report more positive global self-esteem than would low-closeness individuals following an upward comparison. We expected to find evidence for this self-affirmation process on the relationship-relevant traits: High-closeness participants would affirm their relationship qualities following an upward comparison, boosting their perceptions of themselves as warm, affectionate, relationship-oriented individuals. By enhancing their relationship strengths, they would be able to eliminate the negative impact of the upward comparison. Low-closeness participants would, if anything, show reduced relationship-relevant self-appraisals; because their partners are not central to their identities, they would be unable to draw on the resources of the relationship and might instead resort to reducing the threat of the upward comparison by rejecting the relationship.

We expected no impact on competence-relevant self-perceptions; because the comparison took place in a competence-related domain, individuals would be unable to reduce the comparison threat by affirming their competence.

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 102 Introductory Psychology students who received course credit for their participation. All participants indicated that both they and their partner were university students. Six participants were deleted from the analyses because they disbelieved the cover story, and 1 was deleted because she refused to complete the priming task. An additional respondent was deleted because she and her partner were returning students, taking courses part-time only, and therefore might not have viewed an academic comparison in the same way as would full-time students without outside careers. Altogether, 66 female and 28 male participants were included in the analyses.

**Procedure.** Participants were invited to take part in a study concerning how people get involved in relationships. When they arrived at the lab, the experimenter asked them whether they would complete a brief pilot study to help a cognitive psychology student develop the materials for another study on word associations. All but 1 of the participants agreed. This bogus pilot questionnaire served as the priming manipulation. Participants were asked to unscramble 20 sentences. These sentences included 15 words relating either to high closeness (attached, alliance, closeness, cohesive, connection, inseparable, interdependence, intimate, joint, merged, overlap, similar, shared, together, and union) or low closeness (alone, apart, autonomous, detached, different, dissimilar, distant, diverge, independence, individual, isolate, separate, solitude, split, and unique). For example, participants in the high-closeness condition were asked to make a four-word sentence out of the words they, go, will, her, and together (“they will go together”); in this sentence, together served as the target closeness word. We also included a neutral prime condition in which the sentences included no closeness-relevant words.

Next, participants went on to the main relationships questionnaire. As in Study 1, participants in the upward comparison condition were asked to imagine a scenario in which their grade on a test was 75% and their partner’s grade was 90%. In the downward comparison condition, participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which their grade was 75% and their partner’s grade was 60%.

As in Study 1, participants rated whether the comparison would make them feel better or worse about themselves on six competence-based traits (“intelligent,” “successful,” “bright,” “skillful,” “accomplished,” and “capable”). Ratings were made on a 7-point scale with endpoints labeled −3 (less intelligent/successful, etc., than usual) and 3 (more intelligent/successful, etc., than usual). They then rated how the comparison would make them feel overall on a 7-point scale with endpoints ranging from −3 (worse about myself than usual) to 3 (better about myself than usual).

Finally, participants rated themselves on a series of trait adjectives designed to tap relationship-related self-appraisals (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Because participants may be unaware of engaging in any self-affirmational response to the comparison, they were asked to rate themselves on these traits without specific reference to the comparison. These traits included eight relationship virtues (“kind and affectionate,” “open and disclosing,” “tolerant and accepting,” “patient,” “rational,” “understanding,” “responsive,” and “warm”) and six relationship faults (“critical and judgmental,” “controlling and dominant,” “moody,” “thoughtless,” “distant,” and “complaining”). Participants also rated themselves on a set of seven competence-based appraisal items (“intelligent,” “successful,” “bright,” “skillful,” “witty,” “accomplished,” and “competent”). Ratings were made on a 9-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 9 (completely characteristic of me).

**Results**

The predicted impact of comparisons on competence-based self-perceptions. The six competence items were averaged to form a single index (Cronbach’s α = .89). The two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of comparison condition, $F(1,88) = 76.65, p < .001$: Participants believed that they would rate their abilities more positively after a downward ($M = 0.52$) than upward ($M = −0.69$) comparison. Neither the main effect of closeness nor the Closeness × Condition interaction was significant (both Fs < 1). As in Study 1, participants believed they would feel less competent after an upward than downward comparison, regardless of their level of closeness.

The predicted impact of comparisons on overall self-esteem. The two-way ANOVA revealed a significant Closeness × Comparison Type interaction, $F(2,88) = 3.55, p = .03$. As may be seen in Figure 2, whereas low- and neutral closeness participants expected to be marked more negatively affected by upward than downward comparisons, this difference was much smaller among high-closeness participants. More specifically, we had predicted that high-closeness participants’ overall self-esteem would be protected from the negative consequences of an upward comparison. To test this possibility, we compared the self-esteem of upward comparison condition participants primed with high closeness to that of upward comparison participants in the neutral and low-closeness prime conditions; this contrast was marginally significant, $F(1,88) = 2.95, p = .09$. Low- and neutral closeness participants did not differ in their expectations of how the upward
comparison would affect them ($F < 1$). Thus, as in Study 1, participants higher in closeness to their partners tended to expect less negative reactions to upward comparisons than did participants lower in closeness.\footnote{Although none of the Gender $\times$ Closeness $\times$ Condition interactions were significant for any of the variables (all $F$s $< 1$), gender did interact with comparison condition for three dependent variables. For overall self-esteem, the Gender $\times$ Condition interaction was significant, $F(1, 82) = 6.04, p = .02$. Female participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = -1.26$) expected to feel worse than female participants who imagined a downward comparison ($M = 0.71$), $F(1, 82) = 54.48, p < .001$. This effect was weaker among men: Those participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = -0.89$) expected to feel worse than those who imagined a downward comparison ($M = -0.20$), but this effect was only marginally significant, $F(1, 82) = 2.92, p = .09$. The Gender $\times$ Comparison Condition interaction was also significant for relationship-relevant self-ratings, $F(1, 82) = 4.90, p = .03$. Female participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = 6.31$) rated their relationship qualities more positively than those who imagined a downward comparison ($M = 5.90$), $F(1, 82) = 4.10, p = .05$. Male participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = 6.31$) did not differ significantly in their relationship-relevant self-ratings from those who imagined a downward comparison ($M = 6.70$), $F(1, 82) = 1.81, p = .18$. Finally, for competence-relevant self-ratings, the Gender $\times$ Comparison Condition interaction was marginally significant, $F(1, 82) = 3.36, p = .07$. Female participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = 6.85$) rated themselves as more competent than did those who imagined a downward comparison ($M = 6.27$), $F(1, 82) = 3.73, p = .06$. Male participants who imagined an upward comparison ($M = 6.75$) did not differ significantly from those who imagined a downward comparison ($M = 7.10$), $F < 1$. Overall, the imagined comparisons appeared to have a stronger impact on women than men. Because gender did not interact with closeness and condition together, however, these findings are not relevant to our key hypotheses; gender is therefore not discussed further.}

Relationship-relevant self-appraisals. Relationship-relevant appraisals were averaged into a single index after we first reverse scored the negative items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$). A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant Closeness Prime $\times$ Condition interaction, $F(2, 88) = 4.88, p = .01$ (see Figure 3). Whereas high-closeness participants rated themselves more positively after imagining an upward than a downward comparison, $F(1, 88) = 10.63, p = .002$, the self-appraisals of neutral and low-closeness participants who imagined an upward comparison did not differ from those who imagined a downward comparison (both $F$s $< 1$). Indeed, within the upward comparison condition, high-closeness participants rated their relationship-relevant self-appraisals more positively than did the neutral and low-closeness participants, $F(1, 88) = 14.77, p < .001$; neutral and low-closeness participants did not differ ($F < 1$).

We surmised that high-closeness participants affirmed their relationship-relevant self-appraisals to protect themselves from the threat that the upward comparison posed to their self-esteem. To examine this possibility, we tested whether relationship-relevant self-appraisals would mediate the impact of closeness on overall self-esteem among participants in the upward comparison condition (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Because neutral and low-closeness primed participants did not differ in their self-esteem, we compared these two groups to the high-closeness group. First, we regressed self-esteem on closeness and obtained a significant effect ($\beta = .27, p = .05$). Next, we regressed the mediator, relationship-relevant self-appraisals on closeness and obtained a significant effect ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Finally, we regressed self-esteem on closeness type and relationship-relevant self-appraisals. Relationship-relevant self-appraisals had a significant effect on self-esteem ($\beta = .32, p = .04$). The effect of closeness on self-esteem was no longer significant ($\beta = .12, p = .42$). A Sobel test revealed that the mediated effect of closeness on self-esteem was marginally significant ($z = 1.89, p = .06$). Thus, individuals higher in closeness appear to reduce the threat of an upward comparison to their self-esteem by affirming their relationship-relevant qualities.

Competence-relevant self-appraisals. Competence items were averaged into a single index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$). As predicted, there were no significant main effects or interactions (all $ps > .15$).

In sum, primed closeness moderated the impact of imagined comparisons on participants’ predictions about how the comparisons would affect their overall self-views and on participants’ relationship-relevant self-appraisals: High-closeness participants predicted more positive responses to imagined upward comparisons than did low-closeness and control participants. Moreover, at
high levels of closeness, relationship-relevant self-appraisals were actually more positive following an imagined upward than a downward comparison; the results of the mediation analysis suggest that, by affirming their value as relationship partners, these individuals eliminated the threat posed to their self-esteem by the upward comparison. In contrast, closeness did not moderate the impact of imagined comparisons on competence-relevant self-appraisals. Because participants could not self-affirm in the same domain in which the comparison took place, their ratings in this domain did not differ across closeness levels.

We had expected that upward comparisons would have a more negative impact on the relationship-relevant self-perceptions of low-closeness participants than neutral prime controls; this was not the case. It may be that our priming manipulation was not sufficiently strong to make participants feel “separate” from their partner; indeed, it may be very difficult to reduce closeness in such a way as to make individuals’ identification with their partner similar to that which they would feel with a friend or acquaintance. Individuals may over time have formed automatic cognitive associations between self and partner traits (Aron et al., 1992) that cannot easily be severed. However, the high-closeness manipulation was effective in reducing participants’ negative responses to the imagined upward comparison; this suggests that it is possible to protect individuals’ self-esteem from the threat posed by a more successful partner by making their identity overlap with that partner more accessible (cf. Gardner et al., 2002). By showing that primed high closeness has the same impact that measured high closeness had in Study 1, Study 2 provides additional support for our hypothesis that it is identity overlap, rather than another variable correlated with closeness, that is responsible for the obtained effects.

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 suggest that closeness is important in determining individuals’ responses to comparisons within their relationships. Participants predicted that an upward comparison would have a more negative impact than a downward comparison on their competence-based self-appraisals, regardless of their level of closeness. However, high-closeness participants did not expect the upward comparison to have a negative impact on their overall self-esteem. We surmise that high-closeness individuals buffered themselves from the threat of an upward comparison by using their relationship as a resource, affirming their relational strengths. Study 2 provides support for this hypothesis: Among high-closeness individuals who imagined an upward comparison, relationship-relevant self-appraisals were boosted.

It could be argued, however, that high-closeness individuals are not compensating for the partner’s success, but rather they are experiencing the partner’s success as their own. To the extent that the partner is highly successful, participants may come to see themselves as more successful (e.g., Gardner et al., 2002). If this were the case, however, we would expect high-closeness individuals to rate themselves more positively on the success-relevant, competence-based self-appraisals. Instead, we found that participants rated themselves more positively only on the items that were not related to success: the relationship-relevant self-appraisals; this suggests that individuals were not assimilating the partner’s success but were instead engaging in self-affirmation in a domain not relevant to the actual comparison dimension.

Study 3: Relationship Closeness Moderates the Impact of Actual Relationship Comparisons on Self-Perceptions

In Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to imagine a social comparison with their partner. It may be the case, however, that the impact of actual comparisons differs from that of imagined comparisons. It is possible that high- and low-closeness individuals in Studies 1 and 2 imagined somewhat different comparisons; for example, high-closeness individuals may have imagined an upward comparison in a course that was less self-relevant, making the comparison less painful. In Study 3, we aimed to rule out this possibility by replicating the findings of Study 2 with comparisons that were real rather than imagined. We created a situation in which participants received performance feedback about themselves and their partner, forcing them to make an actual comparison.

We also used Study 3 to rule out two possible alternative explanations for our closeness findings. First, we considered the possibility that comparison effects at different levels of closeness could be the result of self-esteem differences among high- and low-closeness individuals. It is possible that individuals with higher self-esteem also perceive themselves to be more closely connected to their partner (Murray et al., 1998); previous research indicates that high-self-esteem individuals are more proficient at compensating for failure experiences than are low-self-esteem individuals (Dodge & Wood, 1998). Thus, it may be that high-closeness participants are more positively affected by the upward comparison, not because they are better able to use their relationship as a self-affirmational resource, but rather because they are simply more adept at focusing on their strengths. To rule out this possibility, we included a measure of self-esteem in Study 3. It is also possible that comparisons could affect low- and high-closeness individuals differently because high-closeness individuals have been in a relationship for a longer period of time and thus have a greater investment in the relationship. Perhaps individuals who have invested more time feel a greater need to compensate for a comparison threat than do individuals who have invested less time. To strengthen our argument that it is identity closeness and not simply relationship length that determines the impact of comparisons, we also assessed reactions to comparisons controlling for the length of time in the relationship.

In addition, in Studies 1 and 2, we argue that high-closeness participants restored their positive self-regard by affirming their relational selves, turning to their relationship as a resource for coping with the comparison threat. It is possible, however, that participants are not so much turning to the relationship for support as they are trying to redress the imbalance in the relationship; if the partner is more successful academically, they may seek to restore equality by boosting their interpersonal self-perceptions. If this were the case, then we would expect participants to show enhanced views of their own but not of their partner’s relationship-relevant qualities. If, on the other hand, they are using their relationship as a resource more generally, then their views of their partner’s relationship qualities may also be enhanced. That is, to the extent that one seeks to defuse a comparison threat by turning to one’s relationship for strength and reassurance, one may boost not only one’s relationship-relevant self-appraisals but also one’s relationship-related partner appraisals. To test these predictions, we included a measure of partner appraisals in Study 3.
We also used Study 3 to replicate our findings using a different measure of closeness. In Study 1, closeness was measured by asking participants to rate themselves on items designed to tap into feelings of connectedness to the partner; in Study 2, closeness was primed using words related to separateness and connectedness. In Study 3, we used a conceptually similar and well-validated measure of closeness: the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) Scale (Aron et al., 1992). Like the closeness items and primes used in Studies 1 and 2, this measure assesses the degree of overlap in identity between the self and the partner. By showing that closeness measured with the IOS Scale’s pictorial images would have the same moderating impact on self-appraisals as the other two measures of closeness, we sought to provide additional evidence for our hypotheses regarding the importance of identity overlap in comparison outcomes.

Couples who had completed the IOS Scale were given a bogus test, ostensibly related to intelligence and academic success, and then received feedback indicating either that they had outperformed their partner or that their partner had outperformed them. Participants then rated themselves and their partner on items tapping into relationship-relevant and competence-based appraisals. We expected high-closeness participants to view their own and their partner’s relationship-relevant qualities more positively following an upward than downward comparison but the reverse to be true among low-closeness participants. Because the comparison occurred in a competence-relevant domain, we did not expect any evidence of self-affirmation on the competence-based items. We also tested whether gender moderated the relationships between variables, although no gender differences were predicted.

Method
Participants. Participants were 22 couples recruited from undergraduate classes. Each couple was paid $20 for taking part in the study. Participants had been in a relationship for at least 6 months (M = 28 months; range = 6 to 90 months); 18 couples were dating each other exclusively and 4 were cohabiting. All participants were university students.

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a study on how people become involved in relationships. When a couple arrived at the lab, they were seated in separate cubicles within the same room so that they could each see the experimenter but not each other. They were instructed not to talk to each other during the experimental session; the experimenter remained in the room to ensure that the couple did not try to communicate.

Participants first rated their degree of relationship closeness using the IOS Scale: They were shown a series of seven pairs of circles; each pair comprised one circle labeled “self” and one labeled “other.” The circle pairs varied in degree of overlap from 1 (completely nonoverlapping: low closeness) to 7 (almost fully overlapping: high closeness). Participants were asked to indicate the pair of circles that best described their relationship. They then answered a set of questions regarding their relationship status (e.g., dating, cohabiting, married) and the length of their current relationship. They also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Next, participants were told that the researchers were interested in examining the role of intelligence and academic ability in relationships and that they would therefore be asked to take a test of “integrative orientation.” To ensure that participants viewed this task as self-relevant, the researchers told the participants that the results of this test were associated with measures of intelligence and had been found to predict both academic and career success. Participants were then given a moderately easy version of the Remote Associates Test (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Dunning, 1995; Mednick, 1962; Murray et al., 1998). In this task, participants read a set of three words (e.g., elephant, lapine, vivid) and tried to generate a fourth word that linked the other three (e.g., memory). Participants were given 5 min to solve 10 word sets. They were told to provide their best guess for each item.

After completing the test, participants were told, “Many participants request information regarding their performance on the integrative orientation test. For that reason, we are now providing participants with feedback about how they and their partners scored on this test. We will give you information on how well you and your partner have done compared to the participants (approximately 1,000) who have previously taken part in this study.” Participants then received a feedback information sheet. In the upward comparison condition, each member of the couple read that they had performed better than 76% of participants who had taken part in the study to date and that their partner had performed better than 95% of participants who had taken part in the study to date. In the downward comparison condition, participants received the same self feedback but were told that their partner had scored better than 57% of participants who had taken part in the study. Individual members of couples always received feedback identical to that of their partner.

After receiving the feedback, participants were asked to complete a final set of questions regarding their perceptions of themselves and their partner. They first rated themselves on the same 14 relationship-relevant self-appraisal items used in Study 2. They then rated how intelligent and how successful they perceived themselves to be, providing a measure of competence-based appraisals. Relationship-relevant and competence-relevant self-ratings were made on a 9-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 9 (completely characteristic of me). Participants then rated their partner on the same items.

Finally, participants completed a manipulation check in which they indicated how they thought they had done on the test relative to their partner. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (My partner performed better than I did) to 7 (I performed better than my partner did).

Results
IOS. IOS scores for male (M = 4.77) and female (M = 4.86) participants did not differ significantly (F < 1). Across dyads, IOS scores on the 7-point scale were relatively high (M = 4.82), indicating that most individuals perceived a reasonable degree of overlap between their own identity and that of their partner. IOS scores were not correlated with length of time in the relationship for either female (r = .10, p = .67) or male (r = .15, p = .49) participants. Closeness scores for male and female partners were not significantly correlated (r = .19, p = .40).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem items were averaged to form a single index, after first reverse scoring the negative items (for female participants, Cronbach’s α = .88; for male participants, Cronbach’s α = .88). Self-esteem was not correlated with closeness among female (r = .11, p = .64) or male (r = .22, p = .32) participants.

Manipulation check. To examine whether participants in the upward and downward comparison conditions rated their performance relative to their partner’s performance in accordance with the manipulation, we used an ANOVA in which the dyad was the unit of analysis, with comparison condition as a between-dyads variable and gender as a within-dyad variable. We included gender as a within-dyad variable to allow for the possibility that partners’ scores could be more related to each other than might be the case with strangers. The main effect for comparison condition was significant, F(1, 20) = 271.34, p < .001. Participants in the
downward comparison condition rated their own performance on the task as very superior to that of the partner (M = 6.04), whereas participants in the upward comparison condition rated their own performance as very inferior (M = 1.65). Neither the main effect of gender nor the Gender \times Condition interaction was significant. Thus, we were successful in creating upward and downward comparison situations.

Data analytic model. Because partners did not interact with each other during the experimental session, the possibility of influencing each other’s behavior during the experiment was minimized; however, partners’ respective scores on a variety of variables could be related, introducing issues of statistical dependency. Therefore, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the data, which allowed us to explicitly model this dependence and to test whether gender moderated the relationships between variables (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997). This approach also had the advantage of allowing us to collapse across gender whenever gender differences were not present, thereby substantially increasing the precision of estimation.

Figure 4 shows the structural model for one condition (upward comparison), using the dependent variable of relationship-relevant self-appraisals as an example. In this condition, we tested the hypothesis that closeness predicts relationship-relevant self-appraisals, both for male participants, represented by Path A, and for female participants, represented by Path B. The covariance between partners’ closeness scores is modeled by the double-ended arrow, labeled C, on the left side of the diagram. Likewise, the dependency between partners’ relationship-relevant self-appraisals is modeled by the covariance, D, between the residuals, Z1 and Z2. Finally, note that the crossing paths are omitted; that is, male closeness does not affect female relationship-relevant self-appraisals and female closeness does not affect male relationship-relevant self-appraisals. We first estimated such a model that omitted any crossing paths. This simpler model is appealing because the hypotheses about experimental effects do not apply to these crossing paths. However, for endogenous or effect variables in which this simpler model had modest fit, the crossing paths were included in the base model. Note that crossing paths are plausible because relationship partners arrive at the study having had prior evidence of the other person’s closeness in the relationship (not because of any possibility of actually influencing each other during the study). This fuller model, including the crossing paths, always produced excellent fit, but as will become evident, in this study the crossing paths were never significantly different across the experimental conditions.

![Figure 4](image.png)

Figure 4. Model for relationship-relevant self-appraisals as a function of closeness.

Relationship-relevant self-appraisals. We averaged relationship-relevant items to form a single index of relationship-relevant self-appraisals, after first reverse scoring the negative items (Cronbach’s α = .78 for female participants and .70 for male participants). We conducted a multisample SEM (Kline, 1998; Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999) in which the foregoing model was applied simultaneously to the two groups, upward condition and downward condition. This approach allowed us to test whether the relationship of closeness to relationship-relevant self-appraisals was different in the two conditions. The model for the downward comparison condition is identical to that in the upward condition, with corresponding parameters of A’, B’, C’, and D’. Across the two conditions, the covariances were set equal to: C = C’ and D = D’. This assumption is plausible and can also be evaluated through the fit of the model.2

This two-sample model fit very well, $\chi^2(6, N = 22) = 4.81, ns$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.00, probability of close fit (pclose) = .60. We next tested whether there were gender differences in the slopes relating closeness to relationship-relevant self-appraisals: We set A equal to B (in the upward condition) and A’ equal to B’ (in the downward condition). This model also fit well, $\chi^2(8, N = 22) = 7.29, ns, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, p_{close} = .54$, and these added constraints did not result in a significant loss of fit, $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 2.48, ns$. Given this lack of gender differences, these equality constraints were retained (akin to the practice of collapsing across gender in more traditional data analyses).

To test the hypothesis that the slopes from closeness to relationship-relevant self-appraisals were different in the two conditions, we next set the two paths in the upward condition equal to the two paths in the downward condition ($A = B = A’ = B’$). The significant loss of fit with this constraint, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 11.66, p < .005$, indicates that the slope in the upward condition was significantly different from the slope in the downward condition. As can be seen in Figure 5, among participants who made an upward comparison, higher closeness participants viewed their relationship-relevant selves more positively (slope = .54, $p < .0001$);3 this positive relationship between closeness and self-views was absent among participants who made a downward comparison (slope = −.05, ns). In addition, when we controlled for both self-esteem and length of time in relationship, the slope in the upward condition remained significantly different from the slope in the downward condition, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 12.73, p < .005$. Thus, participants higher in closeness appeared to respond to an upward comparison by boosting their relationship-relevant self-appraisals. This effect was absent among participants who made downward comparisons.

Relationship-relevant partner appraisals. We averaged relationship-relevant partner appraisals to form a single index,
after first reverse scoring the negative items (Cronbach’s α = .72 for female and .84 for male participants). When the initial two-sample model without crossing paths and without equality constraints on the slopes for gender and condition was applied to relationship-relevant appraisals of partner, the fit was modest, χ²(6, N = 22) = 9.33, ns, CFI = .80, RMSEA = .17, pclose = .18. When the crossing paths were added, the model fit was excellent, χ²(2, N = 22) = 2.26, ns, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .08, pclose = .34, and therefore this model was used as the base model against which to evaluate subsequent comparisons. To evaluate the possibility of gender differences, we set the horizontal paths within each condition equal to each other and the crossing paths within each condition equal to each other. This set of constraints yielded no significant lack of fit, Δχ²(4) = 7.30, ns, indicating an overall absence of gender differences. The crossing paths did not differ across experimental condition, Δχ²(1) = 0.00, ns; the overall estimate of this slope is .15, p < .05. The difference in the theoretically crucial experimental hypothesis was in the direction consistent with the hypothesis: In the downward condition the slope relating closeness to relationship-relevant partner appraisals was equal to −.16 (z = −2.15, p < .05), and in the upward condition the slope was equal to .22 (z = 1.24, ns); however, contrary to our predictions, these two slopes were not significantly different, Δχ²(1) = 1.77, ns.

Competence-relevant self-appraisals. The intelligence and success items were positively correlated for female (r = .63, p = .002) and male participants (r = .49, p = .02); the two items were averaged to form a single competence index. The fit of the initial model without crossing paths was modest, χ²(6, N = 22) = 10.34, ns, CFI = .68, RMSEA = .19, pclose = .13. When the crossing paths were added, the fit was excellent, χ²(2, N = 22) = 2.17, ns, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .06, pclose = .36, and therefore this model was used as the base model against which to make further comparisons. To evaluate the possibility of gender differences, we set the horizontal paths within each condition equal to each other and the crossing paths within each condition equal to each other.

However, this set of constraints yielded significant lack of fit, Δχ²(4) = 10.28, p < .05, indicating the presence of gender differences in one or more of these four pairs of paths. Because the crossing paths did not differ across gender or experimental condition, Δχ²(1) = 1.05, ns; these four paths were set equal to each other; the overall estimate of this slope is .23, p < .01. Examining the horizontal paths within gender, the relationship of closeness to competence-relevant self-appraisals did not differ in the upward and downward conditions for either gender: for male participants, Δχ²(1) = 1.21, ns, and for female participants, Δχ²(1) = 1.50, ns. (Collapsing across upward and downward conditions, for men closeness was positively related to competence-relevant self-appraisals, slope = .31, p < .05, whereas for women it was inversely related, slope = −.35, p < .001.)

Competence-relevant partner appraisals. The partner intelligence and success items were positively correlated for female (r = .55, p = .008) and male (r = .44, p = .04) participants. The two items were averaged to form a single partner competence index. The initial two-sample model with the covariances set equal across conditions fit very well, χ²(6, N = 22) = 4.32, ns, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, pclose = .66. There were no gender differences in the slopes within conditions, Δχ²(2) = 0.09, ns. Furthermore, consistent with our predictions, the slopes in the upward and downward conditions were not significantly different, Δχ²(1) = 0.14, ns. Thus, the relationship of closeness to competence-relevant self-appraisals and partner appraisals did not differ in the upward and downward conditions.

Overall, the results of Study 3 provide support for the hypothesis that high-closeness individuals use their relationship as a self-affirmational resource following an upward comparison. As in Study 2, following an upward comparison, the relationship-relevant self-appraisals of participants higher in closeness were more positive than those of participants lower in closeness; high-closeness individuals appeared to alleviate the threat posed by the upward comparison by affirming their relationship-relevant qualities. Among lower closeness participants, relationship-relevant appraisals dropped; because these individuals would not be able to ease the pain of the comparison by affirming their relationship values, they may instead have attempted to restore their positive self-regard by distancing themselves from the relationship. Following downward comparisons, in contrast, closeness was unrelated to relationship-relevant self-appraisals. Finally, competence-based self-appraisals did not show any evidence of self-affirmation processes at low- or high-closeness levels; individuals self-affirmed only in an area that was unrelated to the comparison dimension: relationship-relevant qualities.

Interestingly, closeness predicted the impact of comparisons on self-appraisals even after we controlled for self-esteem and relationship length. This suggests that high-closeness participants self-affirm following an upward comparison not simply because they are more adept at using self-enhancement strategies or because they have more invested in the relationship, but rather because the partner is more central to their identity.

Unexpectedly, closeness did not emerge as a significant moderator of the impact of comparison condition on relationship-relevant partner appraisals. It is possible that our sample size was too small or that the single-item measure of closeness was insufficiently sensitive to detect the hypothesized effect. In an additional study, we examined the impact of closeness on reactions to
upward and downward comparisons, but this time we used a larger sample and included a multiple-item measure of closeness.

Study 4: Closeness Moderates the Impact of Actual Intragroup Comparisons on Perceptions of Self and Partner

Study 3 provides strong evidence consistent with our hypothesis that high-closeness individuals are more likely to affirm their relationship qualities following the threat of an upward comparison than are low-closeness individuals. However, a no-comparison control group was not included, making it impossible to verify whether the relationship-relevant self-appraisals of high-closeness individuals were boosted following upward comparisons, reduced following downward comparisons, or both. In Study 4, we aimed to replicate the findings of Study 3, this time including a no-comparison control group.

In addition, in Study 3 we examined the impact of comparisons only on self and partner appraisals. It is possible that the self-affirming reaction to upward comparisons by high-closeness individuals also includes perceptions of the relationship itself; if one has turned to one’s relationship as a self-affirmational resource, one may not only feel warmer and more affectionate, one may also feel more optimistic about one’s relationship. To test this possibility, we included a measure of relationship optimism in Study 4.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology class if they indicated on a larger prescreening questionnaire that they were involved in a romantic relationship with another student living in the same city. Participants were contacted by telephone and were invited to take part, with their partner, in a study on how individuals become involved in relationships. Fifty-six couples agreed to participate. Introductory Psychology student participants received course credit for taking part in the study; partners received $10.

One couple was deleted from the analyses because they discussed the questionnaire with each other during the experimental session. Another couple was deleted because they failed to take the experimental session seriously. An additional couple was deleted because one member of the couple was not a student; we used only students to ensure that the relationship dimension was highly relevant to both partners. A final couple was deleted because their combined closeness scores were more than 3.5 SDs below the mean. Altogether, 52 couples were included in the analyses.

Participants had been in their relationship for at least 2 months (M = 17 months; range = 2 to 54 months). Forty-five couples were in steady dating relationships, 2 couples were engaged, and 5 were cohabiting.

Procedure. Participants first rated themselves on 13 items tapping relationship closeness. This measure comprised those items used in Study 1, but additional items were included (e.g., “My partner and I are very close,” “It’s hard to imagine what kind of person I would be like without my partner,” “My partner and I have the same opinion about most things”) to improve reliability. Ratings were made on an 11-point scale with endpoints ranging from −5 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Participants also provided general information about their relationship, including how long they had been involved in the relationship and their relationship status (i.e., dating, cohabiting, engaged, married).

Next, participants completed the integrative orientation test used in Study 3, and they were given the same written feedback indicating that they had been outperformed by the partner or had outperformed the partner. We also included a control group, in which participants received the feedback about their own performance (i.e., that their own score was better than 76% of the participants who had previously taken part in the study) but no feedback about the partner’s performance.

The experimenter then told participants that the researchers were also interested in collecting more general information from participants about their perceptions of themselves, their partner, and their relationship. Participants rated themselves and then their partner on the same relationship-relevant appraisal items used in Studies 2 and 3 and on the same competence-relevant appraisal items used in Study 2.

Participants also rated their relationship on eight items designed to tap into relationship optimism (Murray & Holmes, 1997). They indicated the likelihood that a series of four positive events (e.g., “The love my partner and I share continuing to grow”) and four negative events (e.g., “Our relationship ending in breakup”) would occur in their relationship. Ratings were made on a 9-point scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (much less likely to occur in my relationship than in most relationships) to 9 (much more likely to occur in my relationship than in most relationships).

Finally, as in Study 3, participants completed the manipulation check in which they indicated how well they thought they had performed on the integrative orientation test relative to their partner.

Results

Closeness. Closeness items were averaged to form a single index of relationship closeness (Cronbach’s α = .86 for female and .84 for male participants). Closeness scores of male (M = 2.16) and female (M = 2.04) partners did not differ significantly (F < 1). Male and female closeness scores were positively correlated (r = .27, p = .05). Closeness scores were not correlated with relationship length (r = .03, p = .82).

Manipulation check. As in Study 3, we examined whether participants in the upward, downward, and control comparison conditions rated their performance relative to their partner’s performance in accordance with the manipulation; we used an ANOVA in which the dyad was the unit of analysis, with comparison condition as a between-dyads variable and gender as a within-dyad variable. The main effect for comparison condition was significant, F(2, 49) = 76.49, p < .001. Participants who were told that they outperformed their partner perceived their own performance to be superior (M = 6.03), whereas participants who were told they were outperformed perceived their own performance to be inferior (M = 1.75). Participants in the control condition, who received no partner feedback, estimated their own performance relative to the partner’s performance to be around the midpoint of the 7-point scale (M = 3.86), suggesting that these individuals did not make an implicit upward or downward comparison in the absence of partner feedback; they assumed that the partner had achieved a score similar to their own. A Fisher’s protected least significant difference (LSD) test revealed that participants in the upward condition viewed themselves as more inferior than did downward or control participants (both ps < .001), and control participants viewed themselves as more inferior than did participants in the downward comparison condition (p < .001). Neither the main effect of gender nor the Gender × Comparison Group interaction was significant.

Relationship-relevant self-appraisals. We averaged the relationship-relevant items to form a single index of relationship-relevant self-appraisals after first reverse scoring the negative items (Cron-
bách’s $\alpha = .77$ for female and .65 for male participants). To test whether closeness and comparison condition demonstrated the predicted pattern of effects, we used data analytic techniques for Study 4 very similar to those used for Study 3. We conducted a multisample SEM, in which the model in Figure 4 was applied simultaneously to three groups: upward condition, downward condition, and control condition. The models for all three conditions are identical to that in the figure for upward condition, with corresponding parameters of $A'$, $B'$, $C'$, and $D'$ in the downward condition and of $A''$, $B''$, $C''$, and $D''$ in the control condition. Across the three conditions, the covariances were set equal: $C = C'' = C'$ and $D = D'' = D'$.

The three-sample model for relationship-relevant self-appraisals fit very well, $\chi^2(10, N = 52) = 4.22, ns$, $CF1 = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$, $p_{close} = .96$. The lack of gender differences in the slopes within conditions, $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 2.82, ns$, allowed us to collapse across gender for subsequent model testing. Among the three conditions, the slopes were significantly different, $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 11.81, p < .005$. The pattern of differences confirmed our hypotheses: Although there was no significant difference in the slopes for the downward and control conditions, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.73, ns$, the slope for the upward condition differed significantly from those for the downward and control conditions, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 11.08, p < .005$. Figure 6 shows that among participants who made an upward comparison, those higher in closeness viewed their relationship-relevant self-views more positively (slope = .37, $Z = 5.01, p < .0001$); this positive relationship between closeness and self-views did not characterize participants who made a downward comparison (slope = .11, ns) or participants who made no comparison (slope = -.01, ns).

**Relationship-relevant partner appraisals.** We averaged items tapping into relationship-relevant appraisals of the partner to form a single index after first reverse scoring the negative items (bách’s $\alpha = .74$ for female and .76 for male participants). The three-sample model applied to relationship-relevant appraisals of partner fit very well, $\chi^2(10, N = 52) = 9.24, ns$, $CF1 = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$, $p_{close} = .61$, and the lack of gender differences in the slopes within conditions, $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 0.15, ns$, again allowed us to collapse across gender. Among the three conditions, the slopes were significantly different, $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 6.98, p < .05$. Again, the pattern of differences was as hypothesized: Whereas the slopes for downward and control conditions did not differ, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.04, ns$, the slope for the upward condition differed significantly from those for the downward and control condition, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 6.94, p < .01$. Figure 7 shows that among participants who made an upward comparison, those higher in closeness viewed their partner’s relationship-relevant qualities more positively (slope = .31, $Z = 4.44, p < .0001$); in contrast, there was no such association among participants who made a downward comparison (slope = .04, $Z = 0.34, ns$) or those who made no comparison (slope = .01, $Z = 0.14, ns$).

Thus, among higher closeness couples, we found evidence that partners self-affirmed following a threatening upward comparison by focusing on their own and the partner’s relationship qualities: As closeness increased, relationship-relevant self- and partner appraisals were enhanced. Downward comparisons, in contrast, had no impact on self- or partner appraisals.

**Competence-relevant self-appraisals.** The competence-relevant self-appraisal items were averaged to form a single index (bách’s $\alpha = .89$ for female and .78 for male participants). When the three-sample model was applied to competence-relevant self-appraisals, there was no evidence for differing slopes among the upward, downward, and control comparison conditions. The model fit very well, $\chi^2(10, N = 52) = 5.46, ns$, $CF1 = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$, $p_{close} = .90$, and showed a lack of gender differences in the slopes within conditions, $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 1.20, ns$. As expected, the slopes in the three conditions were not significantly different, $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 2.00, ns$, nor was the overall slope different from zero ($Z = 1.46, ns$).

**Competence-relevant partner appraisals.** We averaged partner competence items to form a single index after first reverse scoring the negative items (bách’s $\alpha = .87$ for female and .88 for male participants). As was the case with competence-relevant self-appraisals, the three-sample model fit very well, $\chi^2(10, N = 52) = 7.75, ns$, $CF1 = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$, $p_{close} = .74$, and showed a lack of gender differences in the slopes, $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 2.67, ns$. Again as expected, the slopes in the three conditions were not significantly different, $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 1.77, ns$, with a modest positive slope overall, slope = .016 ($Z = 3.14, p < .01$).

Overall, the relationship of closeness to competence-relevant self- and partner appraisals did not differ for participants in upward, downward, and control conditions. Thus, high-closeness participants self-affirmed only in the domain of their relationship qualities. They did not assimilate their partner’s success and come to see themselves more positively, presumably because their own less successful performance on the integrative orientation test would make this impracticable. Instead, they defused the threat posed by their more successful partner by drawing on the resources of the relationship, affirming their own and their partner’s relationship-relevant qualities.

**Relationship optimism.** We averaged optimism ratings to form a single index after first reverse scoring the negative items (bách’s $\alpha = .89$ for female and .85 for male participants). When the initial three-sample model without crossing paths was applied to relationship optimism, the fit was somewhat modest, $\chi^2(10, N = 52) = 15.52, ns$, $CF1 = 0.89$, $RMSEA = 0.11$, $p_{close} = .18$. When the crossing paths were added, the model fit was excellent, $\chi^2(4, N = 52) = 2.09, ns$, $CF1 = 1.00$, $RMSEA = 0.00$, $p_{close} = .76$, and therefore this model was used as the base model against which to evaluate subsequent comparisons. To evaluate the possibility of gender differences, we set the horizontal paths within each condi-

![Figure 6](image-url) Relationship-relevant self-appraisals as a function of closeness and comparison condition, collapsed across gender (Study 4).
different across experimental conditions, \( \Delta \chi^2(6) = 8.94, \text{ ns} \). The crossing paths were significantly different across the experimental conditions, \( \Delta \chi^2(2) = 7.56, p < .05 \), with a significant positive relationship of .26 in the upward condition and no relationship in the other two conditions (\(-.15 \) for downward condition and \(-.08 \) for control condition). More important, contrary to our expectations, the theoretically more critical horizontal slopes were not significantly different across experimental conditions, \( \Delta \chi^2(2) = 0.42, \text{ ns} \). We found the expected positive association between closeness and optimism in the upward condition (slope = 0.46, \( z = 4.90, p < .001 \)). However, given that the relationship between closeness and optimism was already extremely strong among control and downward participants (slopes = 0.41 and 0.53, respectively), it may not have been possible to boost the strength of this relationship among participants in the upward comparison condition any further, making it difficult to detect relationship affirmation on this measure.

Taken together, the results of Study 4 provide strong support for our hypothesis that high-closeness individuals will attempt to defuse the threat posed by a superior partner by drawing self-affirming reassurance from their relationship; following such a comparison, they view themselves and their partners more positively on relationship-relevant qualities. Instead of pushing the partner away or denigrating the partner’s achievements, they re-store their positive self-regard by focusing on the strength of their relationship qualities.

**General Discussion**

When individuals are outperformed by their relationship partner in a domain that is important to their self-identity, they experience a threat to their self-regard. High-closeness individuals seek to reduce this threat by affirming another cherished aspect of their identity: their relationship. Because high-closeness individuals view their partner as a valued part of their self-identity, they can draw on the resources of their relationship, focusing on their own and their partner’s relationship-relevant strengths as a means of buffering themselves against the discomfort engendered by the comparison. Indeed, participants who perceived a high degree of overlap between their own and their partner’s identities viewed their own and their partner’s relationship-relevant qualities more positively following an upward than a downward comparison. Low-closeness individuals, whose relationship is less central to their identity, do not have this relationship affirmation strategy available to them; they may instead attempt to reduce the comparison threat by pulling away from the relationship, downplaying their own and their partner’s relationship qualities.

Although we found consistent evidence across studies that higher closeness is associated with more positive relationship-relevant self-appraisals following upward comparisons, we found no evidence that downward comparisons influenced self-appraisals. We surmise that a threat to the partner is typically less upsetting than a direct threat to the self. One’s self-views are likely less damaged by the partner’s poor performance than by one’s own poor performance, and downward comparisons are consequently unlikely to elicit self-affirming strategies.

In coping with a comparison threat, we expect individuals to use any value that is highly accessible in that context as a means of self-affirming (Steele, 1988). In these studies, participants were provided with an opportunity to rate their relationship-relevant qualities, which may have increased the likelihood that they would use their relationship to self-affirm. In any intrarelationship comparison, however, the relationship itself is typically a highly salient, readily available means of coping with the comparison threat; thus, high-closeness individuals are likely to be especially ready to seize on the relationship as a means of defusing the threat. Indeed, to the extent that their relationship is chronically salient, high-closeness individuals may use their relationship as a self-affirming value in a variety of comparison contexts; if they encounter a more successful colleague at work or a higher scoring tennis partner, they may remind themselves of their relationship qualities as a means of reducing their distress. For low-closeness individuals, the relationship is simply not sufficiently central to their identity to serve a self-affirming function, in relationship contexts or, indeed, in any other contexts.

It is possible that high-closeness individuals in these studies showed greater evidence of self-affirmation following upward comparisons, not because the relationship was more central to their identity but rather because they were more threatened by the comparison than were low-closeness individuals; superior others have a greater impact on the self when they are psychologically close than psychologically distant (e.g., Tesser, 1988). However, in past studies, closeness has typically been operationalized by comparing reactions to strangers (low closeness) and friends (high closeness). One would expect that even low-closeness relationship partners would be at least as psychologically close as friends and, consequently, should elicit strong comparison reactions. Indeed, in our studies, mean closeness scores were relatively high, indicating that even lower closeness participants viewed their own identities as overlapping at least to some degree with those of their partners. Thus, it seems unlikely that low-closeness participants viewed their partners as sufficiently distant to make the comparison irrelevant.

In general, high-closeness individuals showed a pattern of results consistent with those predicted by the extended self-evaluation maintenance model (Beach & Tesser, 1995; Beach et al., 1998). Beach and his colleagues have suggested that the negative impact of upward comparisons in relationships is attenuated for individuals who are strongly committed to their relationship.
ship; these individuals empathize with the partner, and so they can take pleasure in the partner’s success. This is consistent with our own findings; high-closeness individuals, who are most likely to empathize with their partner, are also most likely to turn to their relationship as a self-affirming value. Indeed, the process of affirming the relationship may in fact make it easier for high-closeness individuals to empathize; once they have reduced the threat to their own self-regard, they are likely more capable of taking pleasure in the partner’s success. This positive affective response may be due to a combination of successful self-affirmation and empathy for the partner.

In the present studies, we have suggested that high-closeness individuals are positively affected by upward comparisons through a process of relationship affirmation. However, we note that our results might also be interpreted as a form of reflection (Tesser, 1988). When one discovers that a close other has excelled, one may “bask in the reflected glory” of the other’s achievements (Cialdini et al., 1976), vicariously enjoying the other’s success. Typically, reflection is expected to occur only in domains low in self-relevance (Tesser, 1988); indeed, clear and unambiguous comparisons to a close other in a self-relevant domain tend to threaten the self (McFarland et al., 2001). However, in the context of close romantic relationships, it is possible that a form of reflection may at times occur even following explicit upward comparisons on dimensions that are important to the self. More specifically, high-closeness individuals may attempt to strengthen their connection with a successful other to bask more easily in the reflected glory of the partner’s achievements. By seeing oneself and one’s partner as warmer and more caring individuals, one may be able to develop a more secure relationship bond and so one might find it easier to share in the partner’s success. This reflection process may deflect the comparison’s negative implications for the self and strengthen the connection between partners. Thus, high-closeness individuals’ focus on their relationship strengths following an upward comparison may result from a form of reflection, self-affirmation, or a combination of the two.

We have focused on closeness as the primary moderator of comparison outcomes within romantic relationships. Indeed, the results of Study 2, in which identity overlap was primed rather than measured, suggest that closeness is a key factor moderating individuals’ responses to a more successful partner. However, we note that a number of other variables are also likely to play a role in determining the outcome of comparisons within relationships. For example, when relationship satisfaction is extremely low, the relationship may not be a sufficiently positive value to serve a self-affirming function, regardless of the level of closeness. More generally, individuals who are very satisfied with their relationship might find it easier than less satisfied individuals to accept gracefully their partner’s successes. Similarly, trust may be important in determining how individuals respond to more successful partners; when trust is high, individuals may be able to enjoy a partner’s success without becoming concerned that the high-achieving partner will abandon them for a more successful other; low-trust individuals, in contrast, may be more distressed by upward comparisons. Both satisfaction and trust are likely to be highly correlated with closeness; in future research, it will be important to disentangle the degree to which each of these variables is independently implicated in relationship-comparison outcomes.

We also note that self-esteem may play a role in the outcomes of certain relationship comparisons. In Study 3, self-esteem did not interact with comparison condition; however, the self feedback in this study was relatively neutral. When self feedback is more negative, affirming one’s relationship may be insufficient to alleviate a comparison threat. Past research suggests that when the self-perceptions of low-self-esteem individuals are threatened by a failure experience, they may respond by distancing themselves from the partner (Murray et al., 1998, 2001). Thus, upward comparisons that occur in situations in which the self’s own performance is very poor may be particularly problematic for individuals with low self-esteem.

This research has important practical as well as theoretical implications. As one becomes involved with a relationship partner who shares one’s occupational interests, one faces a growing number of comparisons on highly self-relevant career dimensions. The results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that individuals, especially those low in closeness, believe that comparisons to a more successful partner will affect them negatively. To the extent that one expects to experience distress, one may seek strategies to avoid comparison situations. Where possible, partners may choose different fields of interest, making comparisons irrelevant (cf. Beach, Tesser, Mendolia, & Anderson, 1996); a tennis pro can view the accomplishments of his nuclear physicist spouse as irrelevant to his own achievements. Even when couples’ interests have obvious overlap, they may work to differentiate their fields; a cognitive psychologist, for example, may construe her research interests to be completely irrelevant to those of her social psychologist spouse. Alternatively, some couples may combine their interests; if two researchers start a project together, the outcome of the project, whether positive or negative, is shared, precluding the possibility of comparison-related relationship stress.

When comparisons cannot be avoided, couples may seek ways of closing any perceived “gaps” in their performance levels. Low-closeness individuals are likely to expect gaps to be more distressing when the partner has repeatedly outperformed the self than when the self has outperformed the partner; consequently, they may seek to bring a more successful partner down to their own level by “sabotaging” the partner’s work in some way (cf. Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001; Tesser & Cornell, 1991; Tesser & Smith, 1980). High-closeness individuals, in contrast, may be relatively untroubled by a more successful partner, but they may become concerned for the partner when their own success is consistently higher; they may seek to “help” the partner, either by reducing their own performance level or by providing assistance designed to boost the partner’s level of success.

Relationship partners interact on a daily basis and have intimate knowledge of each other’s successes and failures. It is therefore inevitable that individuals face numerous comparison experiences within their relationships. This research suggests that comparisons have important consequences for perceptions of both the self and the partner. In the future, it will be important to address the behaviors that comparisons elicit and the impact of comparisons on the long-term functioning of intimate relationships.

References


